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By JACKSON COLE

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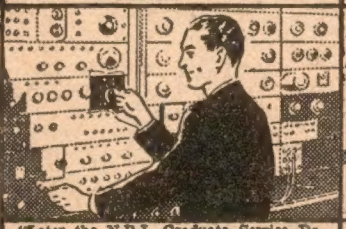

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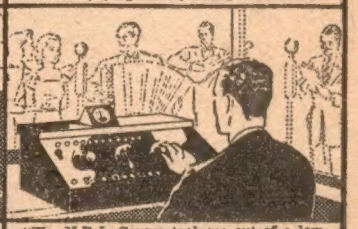

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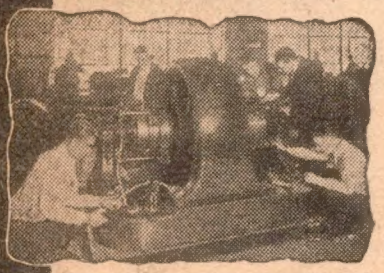

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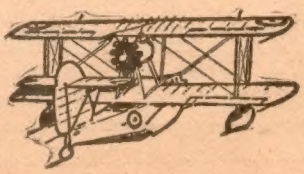

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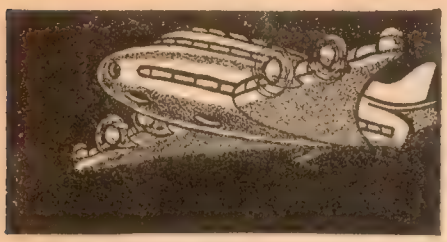

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CHAPTER I

Avalanche of Death

STEVE NOLAN, ready for the cattle drive from Happy Valley to the Texas Gulf port, kissed his mother good-by, and shook hands with his father, Ben Nolan, who grinned with pride as he gave his boy a few last words before the parting.

"Have a good run to Indianola, son," he said heartily. "Wish I was goin' along, but I got to stay here and take care of Mom."

Steve Nolan was in his early twenties, tall and lean, with no spare fat on his well formed frame. He had thick chestnut hair and lively black eyes, a straight nose and good mouth, and a serious, eager expression. The Texas sun had tanned his smooth skin a leathery brown.

In his black whipcord riding pants, tucked into expensive half-boots, spurred with Mexican silver, blue

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Murphy's black stallion reared as the Ranger's bullet caught him in the heart (CHAPTER IX)

Featuring JIM HATFIELD, Texas Ranger, in Fighting Action!

shirt and vest, and sand-colored Stetson strapped to his fine head, there wasn't a handsomer cowboy in the state. And Steve was a wonderful son to the Nolans.

A deep affection existed between parents and son, one born of mutual love and admiration.

"All right, Dad," Steve promised. "I'll be back home in ten days, anyways. I'm goin' to stop and say goodby to Bee on the way outa the Valley."

He swung and mounted Blueboy, his slate-blue mustang and his favorite horse, smiled and waved to his mother and father, and rode off at a rapid clip to join the three friends who were helping him drive the little herd of steers to the Gulf, where they would be sold.

Ben Nolan watched his son go, his heart swelling with thankfulness.

"A fine feller, and Bee Carter'll make him a fine wife," Nolan muttered. "I'm glad we got such a nice home. There ain't another place in the world like Happy Valley!"

That was true. Happy Valley was a gem in the tremendous Lone Star State. It was narrow and deep, hemmed in by gigantic gray rock cliffs that were breath-taking in height and unscalable save at certain points where erosion had broken them down.

For most of its length, Happy Valley was really a canyon, cut by the fast-flowing but clear and never failing river which gave the settlers water for their own uses and for the cattle herds they subsisted on. Between the great gray walls, Green River echoed perpetually, a soothing, deep-toned sound that the inhabitants had grown so used to that when they left the Valley, they missed it and felt in a strange world.

UP under the beetling, overhanging cliffs the pioneers, Ben Nolan and his friends, had built their homes, and the mighty walls shielded them from the northers of winter and from the baking hot, seething sun of summer.

It was morning and the air was coolly aromatic with the scent of sagebrush, and of other odorous plants such as the creosote and the ratama bushes. In this part of the world, except where man fought against it and cleared the land, the long-thorned but stunted jungles covered the sandy earth like a vast mat, impenetrable save along winding, narrow trails forced by tough-hided wild cattle and the *javelina*, or wild hog of the region. These avenues, too, were used by men, some on honest business and others inclined in the other direction, for the chaparral, composed of mesquite, prickly pear, bayonet and all types of cactus, made an excellent hiding place from the thinly scattered Law.

BEN NOLAN went to his ranchhouse, built from long pine logs and chinked with grayish-red mud. He kissed his wife, then took down his long-barreled rifle.

"I'm goin' huntin' up the cliffs, Mom," he said. "I reckon I'll fetch back some birds and mebbe a deer."

Mrs. Nolan nodded. Cheerful and capable, a true pioneer woman, she understood that her husband was restless at Steve's departure and that he craved action. So did she, but there was always work for a woman to do around a ranch. She packed Nolan a lunch of hard bread and strips of dried beef.

"I'll give you one of these new-fangled cans of peaches Steve fetched home his last trip, Ben," she called. "The juice is good drinkin'."

Nolan saddled up his old gray horse, Buck, and rode the stony, uphill trail up the Valley. Behind him, smoke showed in the intensely blue sky, smoke from the chimneys of other ranchhouses and cabins built in the shelter of the precipices.

"Fine folks hereabouts," he thought. "And this Valley is the place. Good grass, good water, and fertile earth to grow things."

The best pioneer blood of Texas lived about him — the Carters, the Lees, the Calicotts, the Phillipses, the McNallys, and others.

It took an expert to work a horse up the great cliffs. It was impossible

going in most places, but Ben Nolan was well acquainted with the region, and some distance above his home he started the back-and-forth climb, dismounting and leading Buck, who had been trained in the rocks and on the steep slopes.

"We ain't been up here for quite awhile, Buck," he remarked, in the way of a lonely rider who early learns to talk to his mount.

Sweat stood out on both horse and rider when they finally neared the summit and could look out over many miles of the thorned jungles. In the distance the Nueces wound toward the Gulf of Mexico. Happy Valley looked like a narrow slit in the boundless world.

Not yet had Ben Nolan reached the top, for other rock reaches showed behind him. However, he could now mount and ride a faint trail that wound in and out of the rocks.

It was close to noon by the brilliant sun when Nolan, with the keen, clear breeze in his nostrils, sniffed, along with Buck.

"Yeah, that's funny smellin' smoke, at that, Buck!" he muttered.

HE turned his horse down the fork of a little-used path and, after about a mile of riding—slow work in the broken country—pulled up Buck and sat his sweated saddle.

"Well, I'll be doggoned, Buck! I never had any idea *that* was here!"

It was almost a year since Nolan had been up here and he scratched his head in great surprise at the sights he saw below him. A great camp, animals and shelters, stood there, and the canyon was clogged with supplies.

JIM HATFIELD

Men, a large number of them, were busy there, wheeling barrows, under the snapping whips of overseers.

"Well, doggone," Ben Nolan exclaimed again—and they were his last words in life.

A bullet hit him in the head, tore through the skull above his right ear and ripped a chunk of bone two inches long from the left side as it emerged after piercing the brain.

In the wild spaces the rifle explo-

sion rattled back and forth from the rocks, dying off in the distance in a series of connected smaller sounds.

Buck snorted with alarm and leaped, turning his long body so that Ben Nolan's corpse—for he was already dead—slid from the saddle and crumpled, a pitiful figure, on the gray shale.

For moments there was silence. Buck stopped his jumping and stood still, since Nolan had let go of his reins and they had fallen over the animal's lowered head to the ground.

A dark hat, not so wide as a cowman's in the brim, shading two glittering, fierce eyes, came slowly into view from behind a nearby rock. A man, the man who had thrown that death bullet into Ben Nolan's head, carefully surveyed the unmoving Nolan before he slid from his nest, with the sinuous movements of a giant snake, and came down. He cocked his weapon again, to eject the spent shell and pump another into the breech.

He bent over Nolan, made sure that his victim was dead.

"Hey, Costerman!" a heavy voice called. "What in all get-out's wrong?"

A bearded man, broad and short, came running up. His wiry, black beard covered most of his lower face and from this hairy growth projected a rounded, cherry-red nose and lips of the same hue that formed his small mouth. A corduroy cap was on his matted dark hair, his stout legs were encased in high boots with rawhide lacings, a flannel shirt was open at his tremendous chest, and he wore corduroy trousers.

He had only one eye. The other, apparently, had been lost some time before, since the socket was a healed, irregular slit. The remaining eye, however, was bright as a hawk's, penetrating, as he peered about, turning his head to compensate for the limitation of his vision. He carried a short-barreled rifle or carbine, and wore two heavy pistols at his stout waist, which was belted with three-inch-wide leather.

"I had to shoot him, Gogettum," the man he had called Costerman said coolly. "He's from that Valley and he worked down too far for his own good. He stumbled over us and it's lucky I was up here on the watch."

"Yuh don't need to make no excuses to me, Costerman," said the squat, stout man, known on the owlhoot trail as "Gogettum" Miller. "When we signed up together I told yuh I was behind yuh in anything and everything." Gogettum spoke with deep respect, the respect a lesser criminal shows to one capable of intricate thought. "But it's shore as purgatory's hot they'll come a-lookin' for this here buzzard bait. And what then?"

"I'll make certain they don't," replied Costerman. His was a naturally cold manner of speech, and the hidden ferocity of his nature was accentuated by this when, on occasion, it flared up with the fury of an erupting volcano.

HALF a dozen more men, in rough clothing, all of them armed with rifles and pistols, had come up behind Gogettum Miller. From the box canyon below sounded an agonized shriek, the cry of a human being in torment. Some other victim of the savagery of these men had fallen into their hands before Ben Nolan had ridden to his death.

"I knew we'd have trouble with that Valley," Costerman said shortly, "but I won't let 'em interfere, Miller. No, no one, nothing can stop me. That I swear. After all, who are these people? Barbarians—stupid cattle raisers. . . . Pick up that scum and tie it on the horse's back."

Gogettum Miller snapped orders and his men placed Nolan's body across Buck, fastening it to the saddle with Nolan's own lariat.

"You go back with your men and get mounts," Costerman commanded. "Bring along three cases of blasting powder."

"What yuh mean to do, Chief?" Gogettum asked curiously.

Costerman's eyes turned upon his aide. For an instant the volcano threatened to burst up in all its searing rage.

"All right, all right," Miller agreed hastily. "I'm goin', Chief."

"When I'm through," Costerman

promised grimly, "nobody will ever guess this man was shot to death."

CHAPTER II

"That for the Rangers"

THE mule train wound slowly in and out, along the tortuous chaparral trail. The sun in the Texas sky was dropping behind the caravan. On the back of each animal were two large rawhide sacks, or *aparejos,* shaped to the ribs and balancing one another's weight on either side. A heavy leather strap placed the load evenly across each mule's body. The loads crunched with the plodding movements, and leather creaked.

In charge of the pack-train rode a Mexican in dark-red velvet, tight-fitting, bell-shaped pants on his long, bony legs, and a richly embroidered short jacket with pearl buttons. His sallow, pockmarked, brown face was dotted by an ink-black mustache and a curved, thin-bridged nose, over which were black, shiny eyes.

Into the wide crimson sash about his middle were thrust two pearl-handled revolvers, and an ornate hilted knife with a twelve-inch blade. Slung from his shoulders were crossed cartridge belts, while a third belt, with ammunition for the carbine he carried, hung from the high saddle-horn. With his reins in one slim hand, he steadied the carbine, resting across his pommel, with the other, ready for instant action.

Nine drivers were with him, urging on the mules with long blacksnake whips that cracked in the warm afternoon air like pistol shots. Six were Mexicans and three were rough-looking Texans in dirty riding clothes and felt hats.

"Say, Juan," one of the Texans called, turning to look back as he rode, "we got to hit the crik by dark. The critters need water."

Chihuahua Juan, in charge of the pack-train, nodded. "*Si, si.* We weel mak' eet."

Hardly had he given this promise than bristling rifles were thrust from the brush at either side of the trail and a stentorian voice roared:

"Fire!"

There was instant and horrible confusion. Bullets and the fire of death spat from the deadly muzzles of the guns trained on the pack-train. Several mules were hit, and began squealing, throwing themselves around and blocking the line, while the others, afraid of the smashing explosions and raucous yells of the hidden killers, reared and tried to break into the chaparral, only to be driven back by the attackers.

The two men at the head of the procession were riddled with bullets, and were dead before their startled horses threw them off. The others, strung along either side of the pack-train, sought to draw their pistols and defend themselves. One Mexican managed to raise his revolver, and shot blindly at the wall of thorned brush. He fired twice, futilely, for instantly the fire of the attackers was concentrated upon him. He received at least eight bullets through the head and body within a few seconds, joining his companions in death.

Chihuahua Juan, who had been covering the rear of the train, was the only one who had the slightest chance of getting out alive. He seized it without hesitation. By not even thinking of attempting to save his men, the Mexican saved himself. He was clear of the mules, and the ambush had begun while he was still a few yards from its murderous center. A magnificent horseman, like most Mexicans, Chihuahua Juan whipped his raw-boned stallion into the air and, raking with his long, cruel Spanish spurs, hit the dense brush wall with a loud *plop.*

A DOZEN leaden missiles whistled about his low-bent head, but within a moment he was hidden by the bush, and, if a hit was made, the wound was not a mortal one, for loud cracklings told that the Mexican was ripping through. Keeping a man in sight in these twisting, constricted trails was difficult, and Chihuahua

Juan had been bred in the chaparral and was unmatched at handling a horse.

"Frio — Turk!" the bushwhacker leader's booming voice bellowed. "Get after that Mex! See can yuh catch him! Pronto, boys."

Men pushed from the screen of thorned brush, onto the trail, and began to quiet the frightened animals. A dead mule sprawled in the path. One of the large leather *aparejos* had burst open, strewing crushed gray rock on the ground.

They were hard-looking fellows, who appeared from the chaparral—bearded, and girded with cartridge belts and guns. Short and tall, each wore protective leather against the terrible thorns. While all were in the spurred riding boots, chaps, gauntlets, one detail differed from the usual Western garb. Instead of the familiar broad-brimmed J. B., every man wore a flat-topped Stetson of a dusty-green that melted into the color of the chaparral. It was uniform with the gang, apparently, for more and more showed, as other men came out.

The owner of the bull voice appeared, pushing up the line, a lanky lieutenant with him. He was as large as two ordinary men, one of those oversize Texas giants not uncommon in the Lone Star State. Both the Law and riders of the owlhoot trail knew him as "Comanche Ed" Murphy.

His lean lieutenant stirred the gray pile with a toe.

"Hey, Comanche!" he called. "Look at this."

Comanche Ed Murphy stooped by the split *aparejo*, running some of the crushed, grayish-white stuff through his big fingers.

"Shucks, Nebraska," he growled to his aide, "Nebraska Fred" Pease, "it don't look like it's worth a nickel!" He did not even glance at the twitching, dying victims of his murderous ambush.

Comanche Ed stood head and shoulders over his green-hatted, evil crew, their leader by sheer brute force. He was the offshoot of some albino strain which had invaded the Lone Star State.

Leather covered Murphy's burly body, thick chaps and leather jacket. His big feet were thrust into enormous, high-heeled riding boots with long-pointed and cruel Mexican spurs jangling. His hair, unkempt and stringy under the shallow-crowned, greenish hat was almost white, and though he had not bothered to shave for some time, his beard was scarcely visible against his coarse, repulsively pink skin.

At one time or another someone had smashed that prominent nose for Comanche Ed, bashing it in over his wide, ugly mouth. His ears stuck out at right angles to his square head. He squatted now to look at the pieces of grayish rock that had been spilled from the *aparejos*. His small, fish-blue eyes blinked with annoyance.

"What'll we do with the bodies, Comanche?" asked one of his men.

Forty or fifty of them were out in the trail now, for Comanche Ed Murphy was a powerful outlaw chieftain, acknowledged leader of the murderers, horse thieves and assorted criminals who dodged in the chaparral of the Nueces country.

"Strip 'em and toss 'em into the bushes, boys," replied Murphy impatiently. To his assistant he said: "Now, what's this stuff, Nebraska? It ain't gold, that's a cinch."

BOTH were deeply puzzled as they turned the pieces over and over.

"We're stung, Nebraska," exclaimed Comanche Ed at last. "Looks like we wasted good lead. I was mighty curious to savvy what they was runnin' to the Gulf in these trains, but I don't know any more'n I did before."

Nebraska Fred Pease shrugged.

"Why should they tote it all the way to Indianola, Comanche, if it's worthless?"

"That's somethin' I mean to find out," Comanche Ed declared with positiveness. "I ain't called King of the Chaparral for nothin', Nebraska."

A couple of green-hatted horsemen, in heavy leather, their mustangs wearing breast shields against thorns on which a man could die if properly impaled, rode from the bush.

From behind a barrel, Hatfield worked his hot Colts skilfully (CHAPTER X)

"That Mex got away, Boss," one of them reported. "His hoss can run like a bird with a fire on its tail. Listen—Shorty's comin'. He says what do yuh want to do 'bout that little herd from Happy Valley? It's below us on the main trail, movin' for Indianola. By this time tomorrer it'll be too dangerous to hit."

"Might as well take 'em," decided Murphy. "We'll stampede 'em after dark tonight, boys."

The notorious Border bandit drew a flask of red-eye from his capacious hip-pocket, uncorked it, threw back his great head, and drank, his turkey neck moving up and down as he swallowed. Comanche Ed Murphy smacked his lips, drove the cork into the bottle neck with his horny palm and replaced it.

His men had finished stripping the victims of all wealth, and the corpses had been tossed into the jungle.

"C'mon, mount, boys," he said. "We'll run them mules and their loads to the hideout. But them fellers shore got my dander up, now. As soon as we've had supper, we'll take them cattle away from that Happy Valley crew, and drive 'em up there, make out like we wanta sell beef, savvy? I mean to get to the bottom of it all. This is my district and I'll run it or know the reason why." He grinned as he stepped to his great black horse.

"I hear Cap'n Bill McDowell's goin' to clean up this country, Comanche," Nebraska Pease remarked, as he, too, mounted. "The Rangers ain't to be sneezed at."

Comanche Ed, a humorist in his own quaint way, immediately sneezed, twice.

"That's for the Rangers, 'case yuh don't savvy," Murphy explained. "I never seen a police officer, Ranger or otherwise, I couldn't kill or outrun. The devil with 'em."

His riders were lashing at the laden mules, driving them on.

And not far away young Steve Nolan and his handful of men, totally unconscious that they were being observed by Comanche Ed Murphy's trail spies, were pushing their small herd of cattle toward the sea.

CHAPTER III

Threat to the State

"HATFIELD, did you ever hear of Comanche Ed Murphy?"

Captain Bill McDowell, although he had overtaken many a lawbreaker himself in his earlier days, when the stiffened joints and muscles of age had not yet forced him from the saddle, still grew excited when he heard of a new one.

Six feet tall, Captain McDowell was as brave as a lion and he had been one of the best Rangers Texas had ever known. It was said he would charge a blazing inferno with a bucket of water and, what's more, put it out.

His old eyes flashed and his jaw set as he banged a gnarled fist in the palm of his other hand, punctuating his instructions to his star officer.

"This here Comanche Ed Murphy," he went on grimly, "is the terror of the Nueces country. In fact, they call him King of the Chaparral down there, and nobody's safe on the trails. He runs with a murderin' pack of men on the dodge who work with him on percentage. They steal cattle, kill travelers and raise the devil in general, as they please. It's gone on long enough! I know them fellers are hard to smell out in the thorn jungle, but it must be done."

"Yes, sir," the big man who sat listening to him said softly.

The sound of the gentle voice was surprising when the speaker was closely observed. Tall as was Captain McDowell, the Ranger's head had to look up, when they stood, to meet the long-lashed, gray-green eyes of Jim Hatfield, his finest Ranger.

Hatfield's tanned face, rugged as the man himself, was softened by a wide, good-humored mouth. He could not be called handsome, for he was too powerful for that. There was, about Hatfield, a tremendous power, that could not be entirely concealed even when he was relaxed.

His shoulders were wide, in proportion to his great height, his body tapering to the lean hips of the ace

fighting man. The controlled, rippling strength of a panther was in his long limbs, and his heart beat with a steady courage that never knew the yellow streak of fear.

Those gray-green eyes, serene now, could darken, like a warning storm sky. He wore cowboy clothing, boots, pants and shirt, a wide Stetson on his black-haired head, strapped about his firm jaw.

This was Jim Hatfield, the famed Texas Ranger, known as the Lone Star State's strongest power for law. On many a dangerous mission, seemingly impossible for one man to win out, Captain Bill McDowell had dispatched him. And Jim Hatfield had come back triumphant—up to now.

"Yuh want me to bring Comanche Ed Murphy in, Cap'n?" he asked matter-of-factly. "Or leave him with the sheriff? That is, if he'll surrender."

"Well, I ain't makin' no permanent collection of such polecats," replied McDowell, with a wink. "But if yuh'd rather hang him in Austin 'stead of on the Nueces, it's all right with me."

"Yes, sir." Hatfield got up and swung around, starting for the door.

"Just a sec, Ranger."

McDowell followed him up. Through the open door, in the brilliant Texas sunlight, could be seen the magnificent golden sorrel, Goldy, the Ranger's gelding that was his pride and joy, and a fit match in his equine way for his swift-thinking, hard-fighting rider. Beautiful as a figure cast from precious metal by the hands of a classic sculptor, Goldy awaited his friend's coming.

"ANOTHER big reason I'm sendin' yuh to the Nueces country, Jim," said McDowell, "is to see what's wrong with Happy Valley. I got a mighty heart-breakin' letter from young Steve Nolan there. He sends word that Ben Nolan, who fit in the same company with me in the War, was crushed to death by a terrible rock slide that buried his house. Ben was Steve's dad, and Steve's ma was kilt, too. Steve asks help. I savvy them folks. They're the blood of Texas and salt of the earth, the kind the Rangers must protect above all. They pioneered the Valley and made a go of it by sweat and honest toil. All are decent people—the Nolans, the Carters, the McNallys and the rest. Johnson Carter's the Valley leader. Now they're in trouble. Steve says that the huge cliffs that bound the Valley are rumblin' and shiftin' and there's danger a lot of them folks may be crushed. Yuh may hafta make 'em move, savvy. And that sort hates to quit home.

"Young Steve Nolan, Ben's son, was away when his dad and mother died under the avalanche, and he also writes he lost a small herd of cattle ten days ago, on his drive to the Gulf port of Indianola. Steve figgers it was Comanche Ed's gang done it—stampeded 'em in the dark and run 'em off into the chaparral. They kilt one of Steve's pards, too, and Steve writes that Murphy must be arrested, 'cause he's raisin' an unholy ruckus there. And—nine corpses were picked up on a side trail several miles above where Steve Nolan lost his cows. It looked like a massacree. All this took place not far from Happy Valley. Been other complaints, too. Steve says he'll be glad to help any way he can."

The gray-green eyes fixed the captain's grizzled face.

"It sounds right stretched out, Cap'n, to be a series of accidents," remarked Hatfield. "I'll see when I get down there. *Adios.*"

"*Adios,* Jim—and good luck."

McDowell stood at the window and, watching the tall man as he mounted, felt deep satisfaction that he had placed the fate of Happy Valley and its good people in such capable hands.

The Ranger approached Goldy and the sorrel turned his head, feigning to nip at the long hand that patted his sleek neck. Then Hatfield put a booted toe into his stirrup and mounted. Goldy, once a ranch horse, and born and bred in the West, bucked a little before settling down to a steady pace.

"That cayuse and Jim are two of a kind," thought McDowell. "They're only happy when they're ridin'. Yeah, the blood of Texas! Folks like them in Happy Valley deserve a

square deal. And if anybody can give it to 'em, Jim Hatfield can. . . ."

After a swift, hard run in which neither rider nor horse spared himself, Jim Hatfield arrived in the Nueces country.

At a small town, before plunging into the maze of trails along the river, the Ranger purchased some further equipment. He bought a leather breast-shield for Goldy so that, in plunging through the thorns, the sorrel might be spared the worst of the impact. He chose for himself a pair of thick leather gloves, and reinforced his stirrups with big leather cups or *tapaderos*.

It was at this town that the discovery of the nine bodies, picked by vultures and other scavengers, had been reported. Jim Hatfield, whose method was to keep quiet about himself and his motives until he knew all that it was possible for him to uncover, easily learned the approximate spot where the corpses had been chanced upon by a cowboy chasing stray cattle through the chaparral.

When, shoving the handsome gelding along the trail a little later, he reached the beaten-down spot, with a stone marker left by the cowboy who had found the dead, Hatfield dismounted, letting his reins fall to the ground.

"Keep sniffin', Goldy," he ordered. "This chaparral ain't easy to see through."

THE sorrel tossed his head. Goldy's mane was a lighter shade than his hide, making a startlingly handsome contrast. His keen animal senses were invaluable in detecting approaching strangers and he stood there in the narrow trail, a piece of horseflesh that would arouse the cupidity and envy of any man in Texas, where a good mount was valued above every other form of tangible wealth.

It was because Jim Hatfield was so thorough, never missing a chance to add slight details in an investigation that he had stopped here on his way to Happy Valley. Of course, he meant to attempt to rout Comanche Ed Murphy, King of the Chaparral, out of the interminable thorn jungles if he could, but Cap McDowell had stressed his own interest in the Valley folk above all.

Some time had elapsed since the awful trail massacre. Beasts had preyed upon the dead, and, when the wandering cowboy had chanced on the scarcely concealed bodies, he had returned with friends and spades and they had interred the remains.

Hatfield came upon the rough mound, covered by rocks to prevent other scavengers from digging out the bones. He shrugged. There were deep boot-heel marks everywhere, as many left by the cowmen who had been there, of course, as by the killers —if theirs were left at all now.

He could guess little from what he saw. Pushing back to the trail, where Goldy awaited him, he walked up and down for some yards. Then, at the side, he saw a small pile of grayish-white rock.

This attracted him, for Jim Hatfield, before joining the Texas Rangers, had attended the university for two years, studying to become a mining engineer. The death of his father had brought him back to ride for Bill McDowell and the Lone Star State.

He had never lost his interest in minerals, however. In fact, his practical experiences as a Ranger had brought him into contact with the hidden precious wealth of Texas, for which men would cheat, fight and die.

"Quartz," he murmured, turning a chunk over and over in his hand.

The pile of stuff was like crushed quartz, although darker gray particles appeared to be bits of granite. The pieces were of different sizes, from powdery white grains to pieces as big as his fist.

A puzzled line touched his bronzed, intelligent forehead. The gray-green eyes were narrowed as he studied the material. He pushed back his Stetson, which was strapped about his rugged jaw, and scratched his dark head, a sign that he was thinking deeply.

"Is it ore?" he asked himself, aloud. "If so, what kind? I ain't ever seen it."

It was no precious metal such as

gold or silver or copper that might occur unoxidized in a natural state.

"Take chemical analysis, I reckon," he decided. "Now I wonder if them fellers that got killed was drivin' an ore train and it got raided?"

He came back to his usual alert state with a violent start, for Goldy had come up behind him and put a warm wet muzzle against the back of his neck, sniffing uneasily.

As Hatfield turned, a man in a low-crowned, greenish Stetson, fastened by a brown strap about his jowls, rode around the turn and raised a hand in the usual Western greeting of friendship.

"Afternoon," the rider sang out jovially. "How're yuh, stranger?"

"Howdy, suh," the Ranger replied, standing there looking up at the face of the horseman.

THE fellow was a Texan, lanky, and clad in leather for the chaparral. His eyes were a pale blue, and while he was smiling in a show of good nature, the Ranger was too shrewd a judge of character to miss the hardness of his general aspect. His beard was half an inch long and dirt was ingrained in his skin.

Not only that, but his guns gave him away. They were obviously ready for instant use, the stocks of his six-shooters smooth. A short-barreled rifle was in a sling under his leg.

Besides, Jim Hatfield never took anything for granted when he was on duty.

"Mighty fine horse yuh got there," the stranger remarked with deep admiration, and his eyes glowed covetously. "Like to sell him?"

"I don't reckon so," Hatfield drawled.

Innate warning touched him. Goldy was sniffing uneasily, not at the single rider upon them but at the chaparral. Slight crackling sounds, that might have been an animal moving in the brush, came to the Ranger's acute ears.

"Gettin' into position to cover me," he decided at once, and remarked aloud, quickly: "I'll hafta be ridin'."

He turned his back on the stranger as he reached for his reins to mount. And that, as he had figured, was what the rough-looking man in the green Stetson was waiting for. His hand flashed to his right-hand pistol and he drew it, cocking the gun by its own weight as it rose, his dirty thumb on the hammer spur.

"Reach!" he cried. "Reach, yuh lobo, or I'll—"

His blue eyes widened and he tried to rush his draw, a fatal move. His bullet missed the Ranger by a foot and made a clipping sound as it tore through the chaparral at the other side of the trail.

Joined to the explosion came Jim Hatfield's blue-steel Colt's voice. The Ranger had correctly diagnosed the situation. The man in sight was there to hold his attention while his mates got into shooting position. No doubt the lure of the golden sorrel had attracted them and they had been following him, meaning to take the horse and kill or knock out Goldy's rider.

With no quickening of his heart beat that might have made his muscles jerk, with a cool brain and faultless precision in his technique, acquired by long practice greatly aided by a natural genius as a marksman, Jim Hatfield put a bullet into his enemy's brain.

The man in the green Stetson had his gun out and it was too dangerous to allow him an opportunity of firing again, especially with his companions coming up alongside the trail.

The bluish hole suddenly spurted blood, the vital life-blood of the gunman. He sagged in his leather and his arm dropped, forced down by the weight of the heavy revolver in his hand. The neck lost all volition as he died instantly by a Ranger bullet.

Only fractions of seconds had elapsed since the Texas Ranger had started his action. He did not even pause to see the effect of his shot but sprang from the ground into Goldy's saddle. The sorrel was moving as his rider's powerful legs clinched on the leather skirts.

"Run, Goldy!" Hatfield murmured, down low over the golden horse's arched neck.

The gelding bounded forward, as

two rifle bullets ripped the air which, a scant breath before, Jim Hatfield had occupied.

"Hoo—whoo-oo!"

The hideous long-drawn-out treble howl came from the throats of the men who had sought, in vain, to get up on him while their advance scout had held the Ranger's attention. It rang over the matted, dusty green jungle, dying off in the hot Texas air.

In the sky the sun was a brazen disc, beating down mercilessly on the parched earth.

Hatfield, his Colt in his long, experienced hand, turned as he rode away, and fired three shots back at the spurts of smoke that drifted up from the wall of chaparral.

"Ow-w!" shrieked a hidden foe. "My arm, Len! I'm winged!"

A bullet whined harmlessly past the Ranger, and then Hatfield was around the next turn in the narrow trail.

CHAPTER IV

Bandit Camp

CHIN-STRAP taut, drawing up his rugged jaw and enhancing its strength, the Ranger jerked on his left rein and turned Goldy to the chaparral.

His lips were grim and straight, and his gray-green eyes were slitted.

Icy rage against these trail marauders possessed him and he was determined to capture them if possible. McDowell's reports, compiled from various complaints sent in by local sheriffs, marshals and citizens of the Lone Star State, had made it obvious that the Nueces trails were no longer safe to ride, and now that was proved true. He had seen for himself that the trails were watched by outlaws, and undoubtedly Comanche Ed Murphy, as King of the Chaparral, had a hand in this.

Without hesitation the sorrel breasted the thorned wall. The thick leather skirt covering his forequarters and upper front legs took the worst of it and, with an audible *plop,* he was through. Hatfield clung close to his mount's body. There was danger that a low, overhanging branch might sweep him off and break his neck, a not uncommon fate for a "bush-popper" as cowboys who rode such jungles were called.

Thorns clutched at his leather-clad thighs and at the metal-studded *tapaderos* protecting his feet and shins. His leather jacket, too, was sharply scraped by limbs of the low, stunted trees.

There was a narrow, beaten strip parallel to the trail and Hatfield took it, grimly silent, pistol in one hand and reins in the other, bent on vengeance, turning toward his attackers.

"Look out!" yelled the nearest one. "Here he comes!"

In the glimpse he had, Hatfield noted that both men wore the same sort of low-crowned, greenish Stetson as that sported by the horse thief he had shot.

One was already moving away, holding his punctured shoulder. He was a short, squat fellow, in leather, and his legs were as bowed as a wedding ring. The second, as rough-looking a customer as the Ranger had ever seen, fired a quick shot from his rifle at the approaching officer, then jumped back out of sight at Hatfield's reply.

Silently, the sorrel leaping mightily under him, the great fighting Ranger drove in on them.

He could hear them running in the chaparral. One of them gave that shrill, elongated howl, again:

"Hoo—whoo-oo!"

They reached their horses, left back in the brush while they had prepared to ambush the man with the golden sorrel. As he tore on past the spot where he had been fired on, Hatfield could see the dead man lying on the trail where his startled mustang had tossed him. The horse had run off.

Any long view was impossible in these brush-clogged jungles. The two outlaws who were in retreat, evidently shaken by his accurate shooting and the determined, swift moves he had made, spurred across the trail below the adjoining bend, and he could only hear them as they moved.

Hatfield turned Goldy after them. He had worked in similar thorn country before, and Goldy knew the tricks of it, too. The pair of scoundrels fleeing from his guns had, he learned from the crashing sounds ahead, taken a side path that ran approximately at right angles to the trail he had been following to Happy Valley.

AT full speed, the wind whistling in his ears and snapping his wide Stetson brim, Hatfield rode with the mastery that had made him famous for horsemanship throughout Texas. For half a mile he kept after them. On a level stretch, the sorrel would have come up with the two, but trails kept crossing and crisscrossing, and time was lost in making sure which path the fugitives had chosen.

Once Hatfield glimpsed the wounded man, who was down low over his horse, spurs dug in and quirt going. He fired and the squat outlaw's Stetson flew off, while the bandit let out a scream of terror. Hatfield was sure they were outlaws, trail haunters, stealing whatever came along.

The mustang which had been ridden by the man Hatfield had killed back on the trail, was running after the others. Relentless as death, Jim Hatfield stayed after them and in a dither of fright, broken by his fighting nerve and speed, the two fleeing owlhooters drove on.

"Hoo—whoo-oo!"

They kept giving the cry, frantic in timbre, as though calling for help.

In and out, missing the overhanging limbs, skirting the worst of the thorny thickets, flew the mad chase. Lather stood out on the horses.

"Hey—who's that?" a tremendous voice suddenly roared over the chaparral, its tones reaching the Ranger in spite of the rushing wind in his ears and the *clop-clop* of the sorrel's hoofs.

"Murph, Murph—hustle!" shouted the outlaw in front. "Get ready! He's a-comin'!"

Murph! Jim Hatfield felt a thrill of pleasure when he heard the name.

"A thousand to one doughnut that's Comanche Ed Murphy they're callin'," he thought tightly. "Them sidewinders are trail raiders of his!"

The King of the Chaparral, Comanche Ed Murphy, must have the paths of the district watched for victims, as the Ranger had thought. Jim Hatfield had come upon them, but the bait had attacked the fishermen.

He reached a rise and the land dropped into a ravine through which ran a little stream. Ahead he saw a great camp, filled with men who jumped up, seizing rifles and drawing revolvers, facing toward the trail.

The three horses, two with riders, dashed into the camp and turned, pointing back at the big figure of the Ranger, on the sorrel, who had pursued them into the very jaws of death.

A giant in leather and a green, low-topped hat—a tow-headed, burly man with a pink-skinned face—stood in the center of the camp.

"Why, I'll be—" he roared, and Hatfield recognized the mighty voice as the one he had previously heard as he had approached. "Get that big jig-

[*Turn page*]

Pepsi-Cola is made only by Pepsi-Cola Company, Long Island City, N. Y. Bottled locally by authorized bottlers.

ger! Kill him, boys!"

Comanche Ed Murphy threw up a Colt and banged away at the Ranger.

The tables, Hatfield realized instantly, were now turned. There were at least fifty men in the outlaw camp. Instead of his being the pursuer, they could overwhelm him by sheer force of numbers.

It was daylight and he was in country he did not know, while they must be aware of all its secret ways.

BULLETS from pistols and carbines were shrieking over his head, touching the bushes or kicking up spurts of dirt. But he had had a kaleidoscopic view of the bandit stronghold. It spread out in the ravine along the bank of the stream which furnished water for men and horses. Rough brush shelters had been thrown up, and there were several flat sheets of canvas stretched here and there as shade or shelter.

Boxes and packs were heaped under these, no doubt stores of food, ammunition and loot. Down farther he could see bands of unsaddled horses, perhaps two hundred animals, the gang's mounts. A number of mules was among them.

"Doggone if every one of them sidewinders don't wear the same kinda hat," he muttered.

The array of outlaws, heavily armed, some in Mexican togs and others in Texas cowboy garb, was ferocious in appearance. Hard of face, dirt-smeared, and unshaven, Comanche Ed Murphy's crew of killers and thieves was one of the most formidable Hatfield had ever faced.

A bullet touched the brim of his Stetson and a bit of felt nearly blinded him as it struck his eye with stinging force. Another missile from Comanche Ed's revolver kissed his left ear and blood flowed, warm and salty, down the side of his cheek.

He threw bullets back at them as he made for the drop. One, at least, hit a target, for a man close to Murphy's tall, wide figure fell down, groveling in the beaten grass of the outlaw camp.

"Get yore hosses, pronto!" Murphy's mighty voice bellowed.

The King of the Chaparral's order carried over the rattling gunfire and the shouts of his startled followers. Then they were running for their mounts, in order to pursue the tall man on the golden sorrel.

Hatfield made good use of the moments he had. He spoke to Goldy, lips close to the gelding's flattened-out velvet ear.

"Keep runnin', Goldy," he commanded. "No bandit hoss could ever come up with you—but look out for holes!"

Goldy picked up a beat in his gallop, streaking down the trail. Behind him raucous yells, and heavy gunfire, told Hatfield the outlaws were coming, but they were shooting blindly, since he had dropped beneath the rise and made several turns in the chaparral.

Hatfield kept on riding back toward the trail he had been following when the trio of Murphy's trail watchers had tried to rob him of his horse. He glanced over his hunched shoulder now and again to make sure none of the bandits was drawing too close for comfort.

Once, as Goldy tore down a straight stretch that was longer than usual, the van of the outlaws showed. Looking back, Hatfield saw that one of the green-hatted gunmen was taking aim, steadying his pistol barrel in the crook of his left arm as he guided his swift gray mustang by knee pressure.

The Ranger threw a bullet that hit the horse. At such jolting speed it was difficult to be sure of his mark. As the outlaw's revolver boomed, he was thrown over the head of his crashing gray into the thorned bushes, and cries of pain rang out with the echoing explosions of the guns.

Hatfield rode on and, with the pack in full cry after him, turned along the trail toward Happy Valley.

They were getting strung out, farther and farther, as the quality of their horses began to show in the long run. The sorrel was by far the best of them and Hatfield controlled Goldy's speed, holding the eager animal back so that he would not run himself out.

He saw giant Comanche Ed Murphy only once, when from the top of

a long, gently sloping hill he could take in a mile stretch of the trail along which the outlaws were chasing him. Such a burly, heavy man, although his horse might be most excellent, would not be able to maintain the top speed attainable.

"Reckon they're beginnin' to get discouraged, Goldy," he muttered. "Some of 'em have quit already."

He unloaded one of his Colts at them and the leaders slowed, waiting for their companions to come up. Against the chaparral their green hats and brown leather blended, like the protective coloring of native animals.

Ahead of the Ranger the dropping sun was a gigantic, blood-red disc, seeming to rest its lower perimeter on the green-brown summit of a pine-clad mountain.

It was not long until the sun suddenly plunged from sight and the stars twinkled into view, while to the left a silver glow told that the moon was coming up.

With the darkness a breeze sprang up, rustling the dry seed pods of the chaparral and cooling the bronzed cheeks of the tall Ranger.

The sorrel could keep on by the dim light, the black walls of the chaparral holding him in the track with its warning thorns. Further pursuit by Comanche Ed Murphy and his men was out of the question in the night. Hatfield rode at a smart clip, however, since he wished to reach Happy Valley by the break of the next day.

CHAPTER V

Happy Valley

SOME hours later, Jim Hatfield paused to take a drink from his canteen, and allow the sorrel a brief breathing-spell in the night.

Dismounting, he stretched his long legs. Aromatic in his nostrils was the chaparral. The peep of frogs and insects, the howl of a hunting wildcat, came to him.

Then the low rumbling, which he had, with some surprise, thought was thunder in the distance, shook the earth again. This time, with his feet on the dirt, he could feel the trembling. He glanced up at the sky.

"Clear as crystal," he muttered. "That ain't thunder."

After a rest he mounted and pushed toward Happy Valley. A few miles along, he once more sensed the deep-throated, sinister noise which had puzzled him.

"Sounds as though giants was rubbin' whole mountains together," he thought. "Mebbe it's them cliffs around the Valley!"

There were earthquakes everywhere around here, at all times, he knew. There did not need to be a volcano near at hand for temblors to shake the understrata of the world.

He glanced behind him. The universe seemed entirely his, unpeopled. There was a strip of gray across the lower sky at his back, the first narrow threat of the new day.

It was light when he turned off the main trail, into which the path he had been on finally led, and found the entrance to Happy Valley, marked by a crude wooden sign nailed to a dead tree.

At this end, as he rode between increasingly high granite walls, the Valley was wider. It was, he saw, really a big canyon, which the river, a tributary of the Nueces, kept fertile. In the cold dawn light, the beetling gray cliffs towered to breath-taking heights, and the Valley narrowed upstream. The low drone of running water echoed in his ears. He did not hear any more rumblings.

He passed a ranchhouse, built up against the rocks so that they would shade the place from the intense afternoon sun. A sign told him it was the Circle M, and the owner's name, Ike McNally, was written over the gate. He could identify the log-and-stone house, the barn and corrals, a smokehouse and corn-crib, and horses and cattle were about.

Hatfield read the names of the settlers as he kept on the dirt road, the chief thoroughfare.

"Bert Lee. . . . Wm. Calicott. . . . C. Phillips."

His quick eye realized that, in order to escape the sunlight of summer, most of the dwellings had been placed under the high granite cliffs, too close if there were any danger of the walls collapsing. Also, the whole Valley slanted down so that a big slide might well gain momentum and do general damage that would be appalling if the settlers remained in their homes.

A ranchhouse, larger and more ornate than the rest, attracted him. It was the Slanting C, and the owner was Johnson Carter, according to the sign at the double gates which opened by pulling on a hanging rope.

Near at hand stood a small town, hardly more than a collection of crude shacks. This was Johnson City, the only hamlet in Happy Valley. There was a flat-roofed saloon, a general store, and some small dwellings. The place nestled under the overhang of a mighty precipice. The Ranger had to lean far back to see the top of it.

SMOKE was beginning to issue from chimneys. The inhabitants were rousing, making ready for the day's work. There was always something to be done on a ranch, for man, woman and child. Cattle had to be tended and branded or earmarked. Some would stray out of the Valley, and must be found and driven back.

"Nice spot—good grass, fine water, fertile earth," mused Hatfield, as he pulled the rope at Carter's gate and it swung open.

Goldy stepped. through, and the Ranger closed the gate after him. He rode toward the house.

A tall, lean young man, no spare fat on his well made frame, which was clad in cowboy garments, black whipcord pants, blue shirt and dark vest, appeared in the front door, coming out on the veranda as the Ranger approached.

Hatfield saw the thick chestnut hair of the man's fine head, alive with his youth. He wore no hat, and had evidently seen the rider from a window and come out to find out who it was. Quick black eyes fixed Hatfield, who instantly noted that the cowboy had a good mouth and nose, but that his whole face was drawn with an expression of deep sadness.

"Mornin'," he sang out. "Light and come in, stranger."

Jim Hatfield pulled up near the porch, and letting the sorrel free to graze and rest, stepped to the porch.

"Howdy," he replied. "Is Johnson Carter home?"

"Yeah, reckon he is. My name's Nolan, Steve Nolan."

"Pleased to know yuh, Nolan."

This, then, was the son of McDowell's old friend, Bert Nolan, who had been crushed by the rock slide. He also was the cowboy who had his herd stolen by Comanche Ed Murphy, who so plainly kept the trails well covered.

"My name's Jim Hart," the Ranger announced. "I was ridin' through and knowin' that Carter had some blooded hosses for sale, figgered on seein' 'em."

"He sold 'em last spring," Steve Nolan replied.

The Ranger clucked in a disappointed manner.

"Now ain't that the way it always goes!" he exclaimed. "That's rumor for yuh. By the time it reaches a man, it ain't so no more."

"That's right," Nolan agreed. "Why not come in and have some breakfast, Hart?"

"Don't care if I do."

The tall man followed Steve Nolan in. He could just stand upright in the low-ceiling living room. A hearty hale oldster with graying, shaggy hair and a jolly red face trimmed by a thick yellow mustache, turned twinkling blue eyes on the visitor.

"This is Johnson Carter, Jim Hart," Steve Nolan said. "Carter, this feller wanted to look at them hosses yuh sold last spring."

Johnson Carter laughed in his hearty manner. He slapped his stout thigh.

"Mighty sorry, but they're gone, mister. But stay for breakfast."

"Thanks, I'd be glad to," answered Hatfield.

Through a wide door, at the back, he could see a middle-aged woman in a blue apron working over breakfast, and the appetizing odor of coffee per-

vaded the house, mingled with frying bacon and grits.

Then a girl came in, pretty in a freshly ironed blue dress.

"My girl, Bee, mister," said Carter proudly.

Bee Carter turned her lovely blue eyes on the tall stranger, smiling up at him. She was shapely and slender, her features clear-cut, and, with her golden thick-tressed hair, she was startlingly beautiful.

"Good morning, sir," she greeted Hatfield. Her voice was sweet and when she turned to smile upon Steve Nolan, Jim Hatfield guessed at once there was an understanding between the two.

JOHNSON CARTER, looking past Hatfield, boomed in his hearty way: "Mornin', Lait. I hope yore foot let yuh sleep good."

Hatfield swung to see who it was who came limping in the door, a thudding warning of his approach.

A slender man with brown hair and a rather narrow face entered, leaning heavily on a home-made crutch which had made the thudding on the board flooring. His left foot was lifted so that it did not touch the ground, and he wore no boot on it, but only a thick sock. The foot was swollen, and heavily bandaged. The man's brown mustache was close-clipped and his deep-set brown eyes were underlined with dark circles, partially screwed-up in pain.

Steve Nolan quickly set a chair for him and he sank into it with a groan, being careful of his game foot.

"Thanks, Nolan," he said gratefully. "I'm a nuisance, I'm afeared. I slept a little, much obleeged, Carter. My foot kept me awake but it's gettin' better."

He looked questioningly at Hatfield and Carter introduced them.

"Meet Jim Hart. Jim, this is Gary Lait. A bronc throwed him and fell on his foot and he's had a tough time of it. He's stayin' with us till he's all right."

"Howdy, Lait." The Ranger nodded.

"We can put yuh up, if yuh'll stay a few days," Carter went on to Hatfield. "The house is full up but we got plenty room in the cabin. Lait's sleepin' there."

"Thanks a-mighty," replied Hatfield. "I may take yuh up, though the stars are my usual roof."

They had breakfast, served by Mrs. Carter, the middle-aged, good-natured woman Hatfield had noticed, and Bee, the pretty daughter.

When they had finished, Steve Nolan rose, took his hat.

"I'm goin' up home, Bee," he announced, and went out.

"Mebbe I'll ride with him," murmured Hatfield, but as he strapped on his Stetson, thanking the Carters for the meal, a number of cowmen rode up and dismounted.

"Pore Steve!" Carter was saying to the Ranger. "A rock slide kilt his pa and ma, and it was horrible! Never see such a mess as there was up there. Crushed the whole house under tons of shale and boulders. We dug out his ma's body and buried her, but we couldn't find Ben. Steve won't give up, though. He keeps diggin'. Take dynamite to move some of the chunks that come down."

Heavy booted feet sounded on the porch as the party of sturdy Texans came up, singing out a greeting to Johnson Carter.

"Come on in, boys!" called Carter.

A gangling, bony man who was in the van declared: "We got to talk to you, Carter, about movin' from Happy Valley!"

Carter's eyes darkened. "All right, Green, but I warn yuh I won't leave my home. I love the Valley and I mean to stick here, savvy, till I die."

"That's what yuh'll do and danged soon if yuh insist on stayin'," snapped the man called Green.

Green had prominent, hard, green-hued eyes, a small, thin-lipped mouth from which grim lines radiated. His nose was long and pointed, his hands large and grasping in appearance. His voice had a nasal twang, in spite of an acquired Western drawl.

"Yankee," thought Hatfield, taking him in, along with the others.

Green wore plain cowman's clothing, shirt and vest, riding pants and

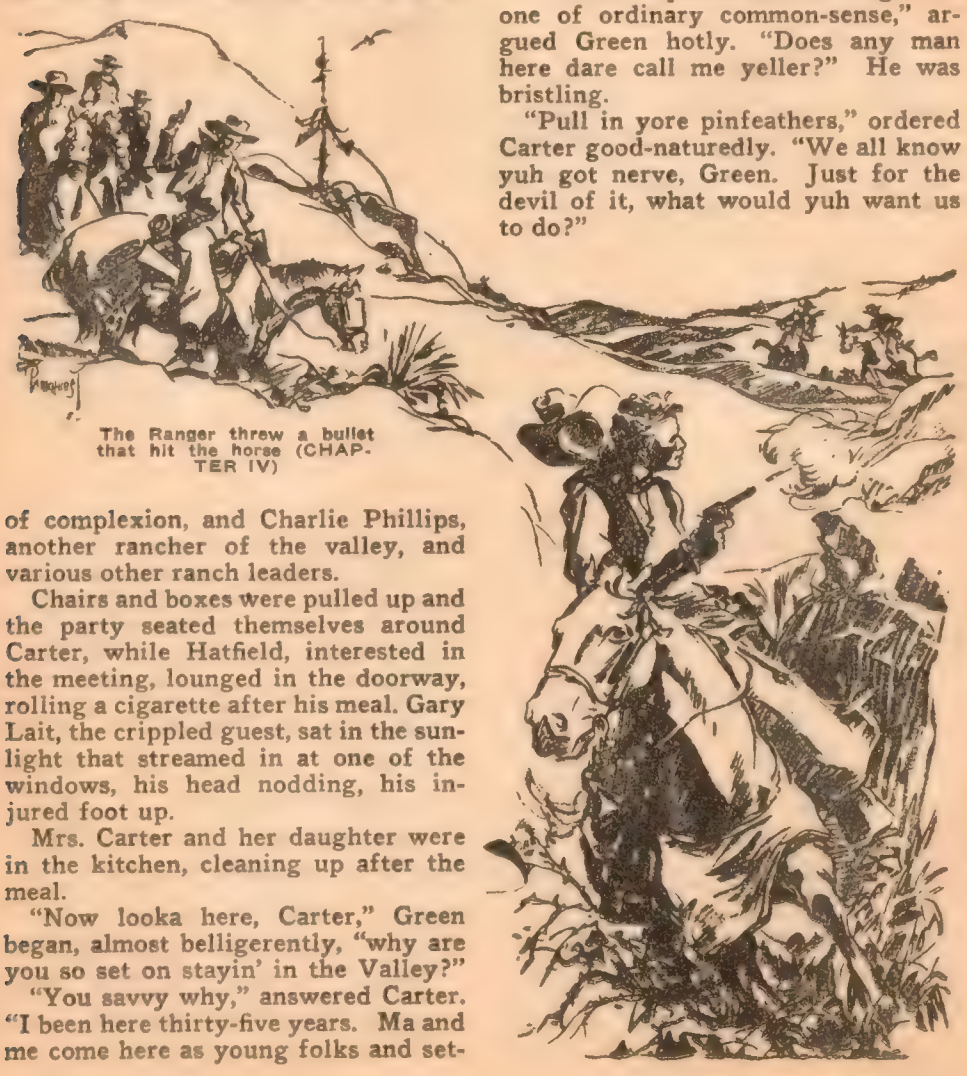
boots, a wide Stetson. His movements were quicker than those of his friends, all Texas men.

They stared at Hatfield and Carter said:

"Jim Hart, boys . . . Hart, meet Franklin Green. Ike McNally's next in the line, him with the big feet!"

McNally, a Texas giant, grinned jovially. He was a special friend of Carter's and so open to jesting insults, a favorite form of banter among such cronies.

William Calicott was a small, flashing-eyed man, who wore two guns prominently at his slim waist. There were also Bert Lee, silent and dark



The Ranger threw a bullet that hit the horse (CHAPTER IV)

of complexion, and Charlie Phillips, another rancher of the valley, and various other ranch leaders.

Chairs and boxes were pulled up and the party seated themselves around Carter, while Hatfield, interested in the meeting, lounged in the doorway, rolling a cigarette after his meal. Gary Lait, the crippled guest, sat in the sunlight that streamed in at one of the windows, his head nodding, his injured foot up.

Mrs. Carter and her daughter were in the kitchen, cleaning up after the meal.

"Now looka here, Carter," Green began, almost belligerently, "why are you so set on stayin' in the Valley?"

"You savvy why," answered Carter. "I been here thirty-five years. Ma and me come here as young folks and settled the place. We got our houses built and corrals, and animals. And there ain't a likelier spot in all Texas."

"I'm beggin' yuh," Green cried, "to pack up and leave, 'fore it's too late! If you go, the rest will. If them rocks do start slidin', Carter, it'll be worse'n an Indian massacre. Did yuh hear 'em last night?"

Carter yawned. "Yeah. But I ain't easy to scare, Green."

"Me neither!" cried Ike McNally.

It was plain to the listening Ranger that Carter was a chief among the Valley folk and that these half dozen men were his lieutenants.

"It ain't a question of courage, it's one of ordinary common-sense," argued Green hotly. "Does any man here dare call me yeller?" He was bristling.

"Pull in yore pinfeathers," ordered Carter good-naturedly. "We all know yuh got nerve, Green. Just for the devil of it, what would yuh want us to do?"

"Move twenty mile off to that new site I spoke of," Green said earnestly. "It's level and there's good grass."

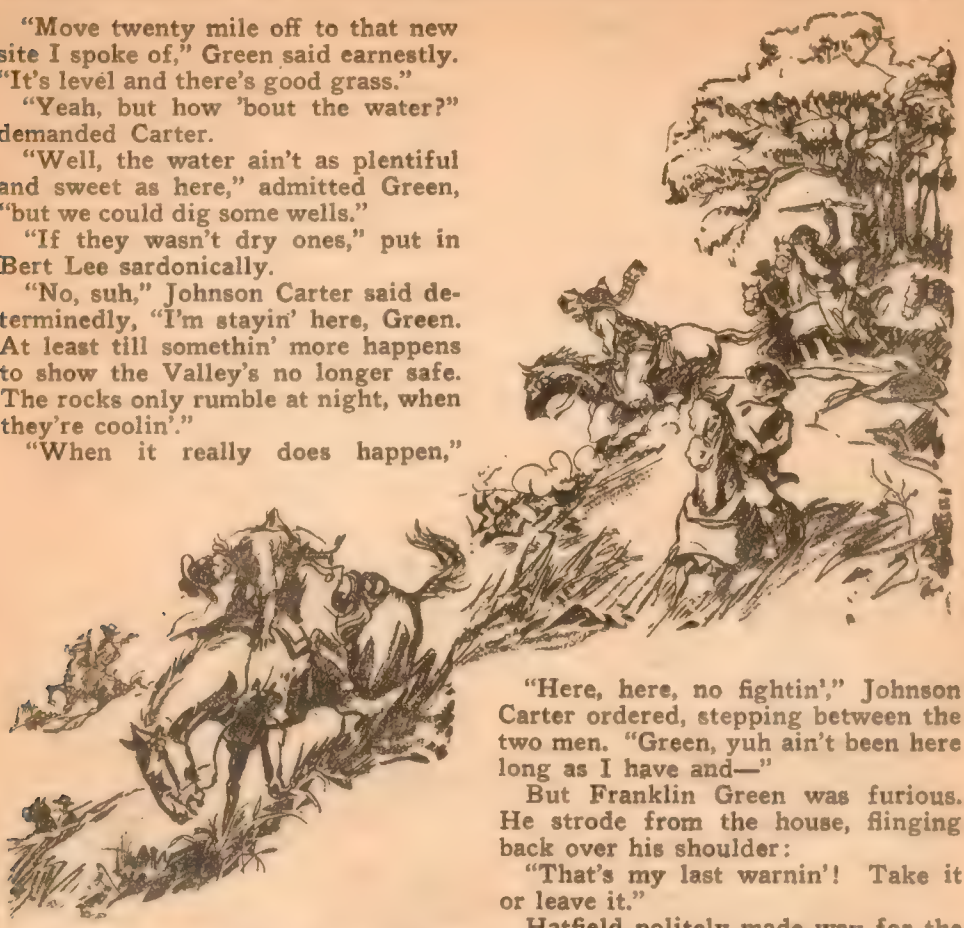
"Yeah, but how 'bout the water?" demanded Carter.

"Well, the water ain't as plentiful and sweet as here," admitted Green, "but we could dig some wells."

"If they wasn't dry ones," put in Bert Lee sardonically.

"No, suh," Johnson Carter said determinedly, "I'm stayin' here, Green. At least till somethin' more happens to show the Valley's no longer safe. The rocks only rumble at night, when they're coolin'."

"When it really does happen,"



Green cried, "it'll come with a rush! If them cliffs let go, gents, a slide could sweep the whole Valley, bury it under hundreds of tons of rock. And the rumblin's I've been hearin' along with the avalanche that kilt the Nolans, convince *me*."

"Also," Bert Lee drawled, "the fact yuh own that new site yuh're tryin' to sell us, Green!"

FRANKLIN GREEN'S mouth snapped shut and he glowered, his bony fists clenched as he took a step toward Lee.

"I do own that land, Lee. I'll sell it cheap. That's understood. Yuh mean to claim I'm tryin' to make a profit outa the bad luck of my friends?"

Bert Lee smiled. "I claim yuh'll make a profit, Green."

"Here, here, no fightin'," Johnson Carter ordered, stepping between the two men. "Green, yuh ain't been here long as I have and—"

But Franklin Green was furious. He strode from the house, flinging back over his shoulder:

"That's my last warnin'! Take it or leave it."

Hatfield politely made way for the ruffled Yankee. Green's face was red as a beet and he was muttering angrily.

"He don't love the Valley the way we do, boys, not havin' lived here all his life," Carter said, excusing Green.

"Consarn him, he'd kill a flea for its hide and taller, he's that anxious to make a profit," Bert Lee remarked. "He's took me in on several deals, gents, though I ain't blamin' him. A Yankee's a Yankee and he can't help hisself."

Everybody laughed. They liked Franklin Green, who had come from New England to live among them.

"Well, I ain't in favor of movin'," Carter insisted. "How do you boys feel? The cliffs never done anything but shelter us in summer and winter, 'fore this."

None, save Green, seemed willing to give up Happy Valley.

"We'll wait, like I said, and see what happens," decided Carter.

Jim Hatfield realized the deep love these men had for their homes. Having carved them from the wilderness by their own hands and brains, they were naturally loath to abandon them. A change of site would mean a great loss to them all.

The gathering had made its decision, to remain in Happy Valley for the time being.

CHAPTER VI

No Accident!

JIM HATFIELD quietly slipped out, and rode after Steve Nolan. When, after a long run through the pleasant canyon, he saw Nolan's horse grazing below and young Nolan's figure up in the rocks, he left Goldy and started afoot up the rocky path.

The cliffs up here were tremendous and more undercut than at the other end. The whole land slanted down so that a slide, well started, might roll a long way before it stopped.

Looking up, he could see the great fresh scar in the face of the precipice where a tremendous mass had cracked off and plunged down, burying Nolan's home and crushing Steve's parents to death. Some black streaks attracted his keen eye.

"Dirt, I reckon," he muttered. "Must've been a crack up there and the water got in it."

Steve Nolan sighted Hatfield's tall figure working up to him along the rough path, partially blocked by loose, jagged pieces of granite. Nolan waved to him and waited, leaning on the crowbar which he had been using.

"Can yuh gimme a hand, cowboy?" he asked, as Hatfield came close. "I'd like to shift this big boulder, but I ain't got the muscle."

The chunk of gray granite was as large as a corn-crib. Both young men put all they had on the crowbar, but still the huge mass would not do more than sway. Sweat stood out on their foreheads.

"No use to go at it thataway, Steve," Hatfield said at last. "Let's try another trick."

Nolan was quite willing. There were tears in his hands from the hard steel tool.

"What's yore idea, Jim?" he inquired.

"I'll show yuh."

The Ranger led the way down to the horses and brought the animals as far up the slope as he could. Then he knotted Nolan's and his own lariats together and took a turn around a projecting arm of the boulder, the other end of the long rope being fastened to Goldy's saddle-horn.

"Yuh drive 'em, Steve," he said, "and I'll work the bar. But watch out when it starts rollin' that it don't catch up with yuh."

With the power of the two horses and Hatfield's efforts at the back of the rock, it shifted, crunching and moving, until it had rolled halfway over, where it stopped on a flat face.

At Hatfield's call, Steve came up to join him.

"Look," the Ranger said grimly.

Shreds of clothing and a pair of flattened-out boots had been exposed by the moving of the boulder.

"Those are Dad's things." Nolan nodded sadly.

Hatfield felt intense pity for Steve. The cowboy's mother had been found the first day by the searchers, and had been buried. But the great chunk of granite had hidden Ben Nolan's body until now.

Hatfield wished to spare Steve's feelings as far as possible.

"You go on down and start diggin' the grave, Steve," he said gently. "I'll lift him out."

Half an hour later the Ranger stood over what was left of Ben Nolan, Steve's father. The body was terribly crushed and almost unrecognizable. Young Nolan held himself well in hand. He had good nerve, thought Hatfield.

The Ranger's face was grave. Despite the condition of Ben's corpse, he had not failed to notice the head. But he said nothing about it to Steve as yet. He wished to think it over, and

figure out if he could what it implied. Therefore he took it upon himself to hurry the remains into the grave Steve had dug. Hatfield kept up a cheerful line of talk to distract Steve Nolan. But he did not inform Ben Nolan's son that his dead father had a bullet hole clear through his smashed head.

WHEN they had finished, they smoked.

"Yore father was a fine man, I understand," Hatfield remarked. "Did he have any enemies in these parts, Steve?"

"Huh? Why, what yuh mean? Not that I know of."

"I was just wonderin'. Everybody had a good word for him."

Hatfield's gray-green eyes sought the blackened scars on the cliff face. "Dirt," he thought again. But the bullet hole in Ben Nolan's skull had started him wondering.

"Is there a way up above, to the top of the cliffs, Steve?" he asked.

"Yeah. There's a path, follers the ledges, not far from here."

"I reckon I'll take a pasear up there, then. Show me."

"All right. I'll stay down below, though, Jim. I got some things to do around here."

He indicated the way up the canyon wall. Lariat slung over his shoulder, Jim Hatfield followed the same path as Ben Nolan had on the last day of his life.

It was wild country up there, he found, when, puffing from the climb, he stood on the ragged summit. He could see Happy Valley, the smoke of the homes, the Green River falls as it dropped into the canyon, and the mountains farther on. Tying the lariat end carefully to a thick pine tree trunk, Hatfield put his foot in the noose and carefully descended until he was able to touch the first of the black marks he had observed, which were quite high on the face of the cliff.

He had believed them to be dirt smudges. He thought that water, having washed earth into small cracks, had frozen and expanded, enlarging them and finally forcing the whole mass off. He rubbed at the gray, fresh-scarred rock face with his fingers. They came away black.

Then he smelled the stuff. He was greatly puzzled, for the black streaks were not dirt but evidently carbon.

He was hanging some fifteen feet in the air, against the jagged wall, astounded at what he had found, when a bullet smacked into the rock a foot from his body. It had come from a rifle, across Happy Valley. Someone was lying over there, trying to pick him off.

Far below, Steve Nolan did not even look up. Evidently Nolan had not heard the crack of the gun, at long range, and with the wind away from him.

Bits of granite stung Hatfield's cheek and one blinded him for a moment as it flicked his eye.

"I got to move," he muttered, and started to pull himself up, hand over hand, feet against the uneven stone.

A second bullet smashed with a nasty, spattering swish, on the granite. This time a flying sliver of metal cut a chunk of flesh from his bronzed, smooth cheek and blood spurted.

Then he felt the searing pain as a third struck him. . . .

"Hey!"

Steve Nolan heard the distant hail and looked up to see what Jim Hart, his new-found friend, was calling about.

He could see the tall man waving at him from the top of the cliff. The Ranger was safely up the rope and had scrambled over the edge.

"Hey, Steve! Get a rifle! Look over there!"

Nolan was surprised, and turned to stare up at the opposite wall of the canyon. Several men were visible, their flat, green-hatted heads showing. One of them, Nolan realized, was Comanche Ed Murphy who, he believed, had stolen his small herd of cattle.

"Why, that doggone cattle thief!" he cried, and ran to seize his Winchester from the rock against which it was leaning.

HE pumped a bullet into the firing-chamber and began shooting up at the outlaws, who vanished.

While he was taking his long shots at the rustlers, Franklin Green came riding up and joined him.

"What's that yuh're shootin' at, Steve?"

"Comanche Ed and some of his men up there!"

"Huh," grunted Green. "That's another reason we ought to move from here, Steve. That outlaw and his gang got a hideout not far from the Valley —I'm shore of it. Why don't yuh put in a word with Carter, Steve, and tell him it's best to pack up and get? The old fool won't listen to me." Green was disgruntled. "These cliffs ain't safe. You ought to know that better'n anybody, Steve."

Nolan shrugged. His eyes were on the rim of the canyon wall, but Comanche Ed and his crew of owlhooters had left.

"It ain't my business to tell the Valley men what to do, Green," he answered shortly.

"Oh, it ain't, huh? I thought yuh was sweet on Carter's girl, Steve. Yuh mean yuh'd feel safe to marry and build another house where yore parents did?"

"One place is as safe as another," young Nolan said rather sullenly.

Franklin Green had a habit of not taking no for an answer, and Nolan was already upset. He was terribly upset at the sudden death of his beloved parents. Only two days out from Happy Valley on the way to the Gulf port of Indianola to sell his cows, outlaws had attacked his camp, killed one of his best friends and stolen the small bunch of beeves. Returning home, greatly disgruntled by this loss, he had learned of the rock slide and had hurried up the Valley to look upon his mother for the last time.

Now the big man, Jim Hart, who had visited the canyon this morning had helped dig out the remains of his father.

Nolan was busy, hunting through the rocks for possessions. He was trying to keep occupied, to keep his mind off his sadness. He went on about this and Green helped him. After a time, Jim Hart, as Steve knew the Ranger, came limping up.

"Oh, howdy, stranger," said Franklin Green, looking at the tall man curiously. "What yuh been doin' to yore face?"

"What hit yuh, Jim?" exclaimed Nolan, as he saw the blood streaming from Hatfield's cheek.

"Yuh saw Murphy and his men, didn't yuh?" Hatfield exclaimed coolly. "They were pot-shottin' at me across the canyon while I hung up there . . . Howdy, Green."

"Well, I'll be dogged!" exclaimed Green. "That Comanche Ed's got his nerve with him, ain't he? What's wrong with yore leg?"

"Sort of burnt me there. It's nothin' but a flesh wound. I reckon I'll wash it off in the river water. Say, Steve, gimme a hand, will yuh?"

"Shore, shore," agreed Nolan heartily, glad to help his friend, who had assisted him.

They left Green nosing around in the rocks. Mounting, they rode to the swift-running river bank.

"I wanted to talk to yuh, Nolan," began Hatfield. "Alone. Yuh shore yore father had no enemies in these parts who'd want him dead?"

"Yuh asked me that before," said Nolan. He wondered at the tall fellow's insistence. "The folks in the Valley wouldn't have hurt Dad. 'Course, a man like Comanche Ed Murphy would as soon kill a man as snort."

"Huh!"

NOLAN helped the Ranger wash the furrow in his thigh with clean water from the stream and then bandage it.

"What yuh lookin' for, in the river, Jim?" he asked curiously, seeing the way Hatfield was peering at the rocks and sand in the shallows.

"Gold or silver, mebbe."

"None around here," Nolan told him, with a laugh.

"Yuh shore of it?"

"Positive. In fact, Jim, I never heard tell of any mineral of value in the Valley. Dad would've knowed if there was."

Again the big man grunted. He was an impressive specimen of humanity, this Jim Hart who had chanced, as

Nolan believed, upon the Valley. Rugged, quiet, but evidently a first-class fighting man and shrewd as they came. A decent young fellow like Steve Nolan could not help liking him.

"I ain't seen any signs of metals, at that," he said. "Usually there'll be colors in the rocks, and placer gold or silver 'll show. Copper cliffs are red or even blue sometimes."

"Say, what yuh drivin' at?" demanded Nolan.

"I'll tell yuh, but keep it under yore hat, Steve. Yore father was shot to death, a bullet put through his head, before he was placed under that rock slide. And—that slide wasn't an accident!"

CHAPTER VII

Outlaw Chase

NOLAN'S heart gave a sickening jump as he took in the information "Jim Hart" gave him. He choked, looking into the stern, gray-green eyes of his masterful new acquaintance, but he was convinced that Jim knew what he was talking about.

"I had a funny feelin'," he muttered, "but nothin' to pin it on definite, Jim. I done wrote the Rangers."

"See them black streaks up there?" asked Hatfield. "That ain't dirt, as I thought, but carbon from burnt blastin' powder or dynamite. Holes was drilled in the top and charges lowered into the cracks, then set off that night yore parents were buried, Steve. Now tell me, who'd do such a thing?"

Fury burned in Nolan's heart and his fists clenched.

"They—they was murdered, then!" he cried. "Murdered! I—I'll catch the sidewinders who done it and tear 'em to pieces for this!"

"Try to think," begged Jim Hart. "Tell me who'd be likely to want 'em outa the way, Steve."

Steve Nolan racked his brain, stunned at the information just received.

"I—I can't think of anybody who'd do such a thing, Jim."

"How about Comanche Ed Murphy?"

"Why, Murphy might've done it, or any of his outlaws. But why would they go to all that trouble to hide my father's body? They'd just leave him lie if they'd gunned him."

"'Tis a puzzle—one we got to solve, Steve. As I said, keep it under yore hat, and don't talk it around."

"All right, Jim. But—if yuh get any idea of who was the skunks who done it, I want the first crack at 'em, savvy?"

"I'll promise yuh that."

A pebble rattled down over the bank and plunked into the water near them. Absorbed in their talk, they had not heard Franklin Green's quiet approach. The long-nosed Yankee blinked at them from above.

"I reckon I'll be ridin', boys," he said in his twangy voice.

Nolan wondered how much of their conversation Green had overheard. Green was a gossip and could not keep anything to himself for long.

"You take care of yoreself, Steve, and keep away from here for awhile," advised Jim, when Green had ridden off, and they returned to their own horses. "I want to get this all straight. The rocks look mighty dangerous in spots, and it might be a good idea for yore friends to go into camp at the other end of the Valley, till we see what's what. A big slide might sweep a lot of houses and the town."

"Where yuh goin' now, Jim?" Steve took the Ranger's interest as a matter of course, too stunned to question his reasons, but still having no idea that this Jim Hart he knew was a Ranger.

"My idea is to climb the other wall and see if Comanche Ed and his men are still hangin' around there. Can I get my hoss up there?"

"Yeah. Cross the river at the ford and yuh'll see a trail. Foller it."

"All right. I'll see yuh later, Steve."

Steve Nolan nodded. He felt that this new friend of his wished him to stay behind. The big man, on the handsome gelding, crossed the river and started up the trail, disappearing after a time from Nolan's vision.

NOLAN was still astounded at the information given him about the landslide which had killed his parents. He kept looking up at the black streaks on the cliff.

"I got to see for myself," he decided.

An hour later he was lying up there. Sure enough, he found some of the black stuff near enough to touch. It wasn't regular earth but fine-grained particles, as he had been told.

He had brought his horse up with him, and mounting, he took the trail that had been followed by Ben Nolan on the day he died. But he was not turned off as his father had been, nor did he go as far. He was about to swing his horse and return to the Valley, since it was growing late and he intended to spend the night at the Carter's ranch, when shots banged in the hills and a scream rang out.

"What in tarnation's that?" he muttered, dropping a hand to his six-shooter.

He could look down across a shallow dip, studded with rocks and pines. Several riders broke into his view. One was a bareheaded Mexican on a brown horse, low over its back, kicking its ribs frantically to urge more speed out of the beast. Nolan glimpsed the Mex's rolling eyes as he glanced back at his pursuers, three mounted men spurring on his trail and shooting after him.

They were not cowmen—Nolan could tell that by their dress.

"Hullo, over there!" he bellowed, sending his voice rattling across the dip. "What's wrong?"

Intent on their quarry, whooping and firing their six-guns, they did not hear him. Steve Nolan was a Westerner, an individualist like most of his kind, and not the sort to interfere with the private affairs of others. But he was also a brave man and the way the trio went after the unfortunate Mexican, who was unarmed, ragged, and in the last transports of fright, aroused his protective instinct.

"I'll find out what they're up to, 'fore I let 'em go on with *that!*" he muttered, spurring his horse down the hill, and drawing his Colt.

He sent three shots into the air. The trio chasing the Mexican heard this. They slowed and the one in the lead, a broad man wearing a corduroy cap, faced toward Nolan. Steve Nolan could see the ruby spots of color marking his nose and cherub mouth, circled by a black beard.

The Mexican, too, heard Nolan's signal shots and veered his lathered horse, screaming something in a high-pitched voice. He cut over toward the cowboy, but then the squat man with the beard and his two friends saw their chance. They jerked their reins and spurred on a shorter line of the triangle.

Slowing for a moment, the leader threw a carbine to his shoulder. Nolan saw the spurts of smoke as it exploded, once, twice. The Mexican's horse, broadside to the rifle, went down, rolling over and over on the rough hill. The rider hit on all fours, jumped up and ran, screaming all the while, to meet Nolan.

"Hey, cut that out!" bellowed Nolan, but though he fired a threatening bullet over the head of the squat man, the fellow came up on the dismounted Mexican and shot him in the back.

The unlucky, brown-skinned peon fell and never moved again.

"Hoss thief! Hoss thief!" shouted the squat man.

Steve Nolan swore. He could do nothing, now. If the Mexican had really stolen the horse he had been riding, then he deserved his fate. On the other hand, it might be a subterfuge to excuse the shooting.

HIS suspicions were already aroused by what his tall friend had told him concerning his father's death and the Valley cliffs. He did not like at all the way the bearded man with the red nose started at him, trailed by his two armed mates.

For a moment or two he sat his saddle, having pulled up his horse. They came swiftly toward him, and the leader waved his arm to Nolan, to wait.

"Doggone, they shore got a rough way to 'em," Nolan muttered.

He did not know these fellows, but he did know that Comanche Ed Murphy's men roamed these parts. He had

already seen Murphy fire on Jim Hart.

"This is no place for us, Blueboy," he told his slate-blue mustang.

He pulled his reins and Blueboy swung obediently. At a spur touch he trotted off, away from the oncoming trio.

"Come back, mister, come back!" the heavy-voiced leader called after him.

But Steve Nolan, glancing over his shoulder, kept on. Several more men breasted the rise over which the Mexican and his pursuers had come. They were all armed, the sunlight glistening on well tended carbines and revolvers.

Blueboy settled down to it and, showing his heels to the squat man and his followers, soon convinced them he would not easily be overtaken.

Something like a sullen, giant hornet burred past Nolan's ear. He knew the sound of a rifle bullet too well to mistake it. Swinging as Blueboy galloped over the rough ground, he could see that the squat man had his carbine to his shoulder and was shooting at him. As Nolan watched, the man pulled trigger again. This time the bullet spurted up dust a yard from Blueboy's moving hoofs.

"I'm shore glad we didn't stop for tea," thought Nolan wryly.

He rapped back three 45-caliber slugs from his Colt, to slow them. Low over Blueboy, he picked up speed and rode for safety.

Confident of Blueboy's ability to outrun the other horses, he headed back for Happy Valley, where he could get assistance against the gang, if they trailed him so far. But as Nolan flashed up a long slope, now and then aware of a humming bullet seeking him, other horsemen breasted the crest of it, riding the trail from the Valley and blocking him off from the direct route home.

In the lead Nolan recognized the giant figure of Comanche Ed Murphy, coming with one long leg raised comfortably on his saddle. Close behind the outlaw chief, the King of the Chaparral, more and more bearded, green-hatted horsemen appeared.

They had heard the shooting and were on the alert.

"Must 've got around past Jim," muttered the disturbed cowboy.

He was taken aback for a moment and the squat man, hallooing as though on the trail of a fox, was coming fast.

"Stop him—stop that skunk!" Nolan heard him roar to Comanche Ed Murphy.

Nolan recovered, and pointed Blueboy to the right, the only direction he could take. It was not the way he wished to go but he could no longer make a choice. His only chance of life, he realized, was in outrunning the gangs.

BEHIND him the country rose in tremendous, steep mountains, heavily bushed and overgrown with pines and junipers. Great gray rock spires stuck up toward the blue Texas sky. He knew the difficulty of traversing that section, even for a man on foot. The land into which he was heading was also wilderness, but it was hunting country—hilly, filled

[*Turn page*]

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with thickets and patches of timber and rocks, but threaded by trails.

Comanche Ed Murphy and his men could easily, Nolan knew, have eluded Jim Hart, had they wished to do so, on the other side of Happy Valley canyon. They might even have killed the big fellow, Nolan thought uneasily, looking over his shoulder again to see what the pursuit was doing.

Murphy had drawn a Colt and was banging away at him, turning to join the chase after Nolan. The squat man and he were no doubt allies.

Knowing that they would murder him if they caught up, Steve Nolan put everything he had into riding, guiding Blueboy along the rocky, uneven trails.

He kept on for an hour, then another. It was still light, but he hoped for the darkness in which he might elude them as they held doggedly to his trail. He was being driven further and further from home.

CHAPTER VIII

A Sinister Pact

DARKNESS had fallen over the vast Texas wilderness. In the distance the low-toned purling of the river echoed, hollowly, as it flowed through its rocky bed.

A yellow, gibbous moon, not yet full but past the half, hung in the lower quarter of the sky, splashed by the milky stars.

A giant figure slouched on a rock, his saddled horse with reins to the ground, awaiting him in the background. Another man in the same sort of flat-topped hat, black in the moonlight, stood looking down at him. The man who was on his feet scratched a match. By its tiny flicker, the Stetsons these two wore showed greenish. The tow hair and pink face of Comanche Ed Murphy also showed for an instant. The standing man was lanky Nebraska Pease, his lieutenant.

"He oughta be here any minute, Murphy," a squat fellow, off to the right, remarked.

That was Gogettum Miller. With him was a bony Mexican in steeple-crowned sombrero and fancy clothing —Chihuahua Juan. His whitish eyes rolled in his dark face.

"All right," Comanche Ed replied. "I'd shore like to meet this here 'Chief' yuh talk so much about, Miller. If he's as smart as yuh say he is, then it's a deal."

"Yuh'll find Costerman as keen a man as any yuh ever come up with," declared Gogettum. "He comes from Cornwall, England, but he's been in this country a long time. Yuh'd never know he's a Limey, from his talk."

"What'd he come to Texas for?" Murphy asked curiously.

Miller laughed. "He don't talk much 'bout that. But far as I can gather, Scotland Yard—that's the Law over there—was on his trail and if they caught him in the East, why, they'd send him back or put him away here."

"Gogettum," a cold voice said, from the nearby shadows, "you always did talk too much!"

Miller jumped, and as Comanche Ed also heaved himself up, his big hand quickly sought his revolver butt, riding at his bunched waist.

"Oh—howdy, Chief!" Gogettum Miller said. "Didn't savvy yuh was so close! Say, this is Comanche Ed Murphy—Murph, meet Costerman, my chief!"

John Costerman stepped into the silver light circle, where the moonlight came through the little clearing among the trees. A gun-belt, with a pistol in the holster, was strapped around his middle, and a wide hat shaded his bitter face. He moved with a serpent's gliding but deadly grace, silent and sinister in the night.

"Where's yore hoss, Chief?" asked Gogettum.

"I left him back, off the trail," answered Costerman.

He was looking closely at the giant outlaw, King of the Chaparral.

"Have a smoke?" he invited.

He struck a match, holding it to the thin cheroot which he handed to Murphy, so that Comanche Ed's face was lighted for him. The giant King of

the Chaparral was inches taller than Costerman, but he did not exude the mental power that the Cornishman did.

"Let's set down and chew the fat," suggested Murphy, as he puffed on the cigar Costerman had given him, and shook hands with the "Chief," as Gogettum Miller called the cold-voiced man.

"Whatever you like," replied Costerman.

The two crime leaders sat facing each other on the flat rock, while Miller, Nebraska Pease and Chihuahua Juan hovered close by.

"I didn't like that raid you made on my train, Murphy," began Costerman. "Chihuahua's the only man who escaped alive."

"Murphy's sorry 'bout that, Chief," Gogettum Miller interposed quickly. "He didn't know who we was. Then he come to our camp here with some beeves, and we was pards from the start. Ain't that so, Murph?"

"That's so," Comanche Ed agreed heartily. "My trail men seen yore pack-trains goin' through, and finally I got so curious I ambushed one. I couldn't figger what that stuff was, though, till Gogettum put me wise. Yuh're my kinda folks, Costerman. Fact is, I'm ready to throw in with yuh—'course there's enough in it for me."

"Why should I let you in?" demanded Costerman.

Comanche Ed frowned, the cigar glowing deep-red as he drew in on it. He leaned forward.

"Now see here, Costerman, I ain't meanin' to threaten yuh. Yuh're a smart hombre and I want to work with yuh. On the other foot, I ain't helpless in these parts. They don't call me King of the Chaparral for nothin'. I let some of yore trains pass, not botherin' with 'em at first. But if I say so and we put our mind to it, why,

The workman dropped the tray of bars with a crash (CHAPTER XII)

yuh'll never get another load through to the Gulf. I got seventy men behind me and can take on more whenever I want. They're glad to join up with Comanche Ed—every posse-dodger in Texas. No sheriff can touch us."

"Sheriffs, no," agreed Costerman. Then, a sardonic note in his voice, he inquired: "Have you ever heard of the Texas Rangers?"

Murphy laughed raucously. "Say, I shot one of 'em once, across the Pecos! There ain't enough of 'em to stop me. Ain't but a hundred or so in the whole state. Yuh're a Limey, and yuh may not savvy how big Texas is, but it's over a quarter million square miles of chaparral, mountains, desert and plains! Why, yuh could lose an army in it and never find 'em. Just these Nueces thorn jungles are so big yuh could ride all year and never hit the same trail twice!"

"I'm aware of the state's size," observed Costerman drily. "Also of its scant police protection. Just the same, the Rangers have a habit of popping up where there's trouble. For reasons of my own, I've kept hidden. To join with a notorious criminal like you may force me into the open."

"Aw, Chief," cried Gogettum Miller, "Murph's a swell feller! And we do need help. Things are gettin' outa control. It's hard, packin' the stuff all the way to the Gulf, and Chihuahua Juan has his hands full. Then we got to bring in peons as well."

Costerman nodded, finally seemed convinced.

"Yes, I do need you, Murphy," he admitted. "It's too expensive, sending the stuff out. The profit's too small and Slattery—he's my plant manager and partner on the Gulf—claims we've got to move in closer to the source. We sunk plenty of money in equipment to start. My idea is to set up works here as soon as I can. But this cursed Valley has blocked me. It'd cost too much to buy all these people out. It's irritating to see a big fortune in sight and be stopped by a small group of stupid yokels. I need Happy Valley, need it badly."

"For what?" asked Comanche Ed.

"For engineering purposes. Besides, they're growing more and more dangerous to me. It's plain we can't hide much longer and once the secret is out, why, it means the price of land goes up sky-high, and I won't be able to expand as I planned. I need to keep out of the public eye."

"Tell yuh what I'll do," suggested Murphy. "I'll throw in with yuh, Costerman, and I guarantee to clean out the Valley. I'll chase them cow nurses so far they won't remember they ever seen the Valley!"

COSTERMAN seemed pleased, as he nodded.

"That's my idea, Murphy," he said. "You're smart to have caught it so quickly. It's vital we control Happy Valley. I don't care how it's brought about, but it'll have to be fast."

"We thought the fallin' cliffs'd scare 'em out," Gogettum said. "But they ain't started yet."

Costerman cursed. "That old fool Carter is as stubborn as a donkey. So are his friends. They won't move."

"They will when I'm through with 'em," Murphy promised grimly. "That is, if they can still move at all." His teeth showed as he grinned.

"A word of warning," Costerman added. "What I said about the Texas Rangers is true, Murphy. I think there's one in the neighborhood right now."

"Yeah?" cried Comanche Ed eagerly. "Say, lemme at him! What's he look like? Does he say he's a Ranger?"

"No. He pretended to have come to the Valley by chance. He's near as tall as you, Murphy, rides a handsome golden sorrel, has black hair and—"

Comanche Ed Murphy did not let him finish, but burst out into a torrent of profanity that singed the night air.

"Why, that sidewinder! I never savvied he was a Ranger! Thought mebbe he might be a sheriff from somewheres, but I didn't see no star on him. I'll get him! I'll tear him to pieces!"

"You can try," Costerman said drily. "It's only a guess on my part that he's a Texas Ranger, but we won't take any chances. He may be only a sheriff hunting someone down here, but let's

say he's a Ranger. I believe he's alone."

"Well, the quicker I get goin', the better," Murphy said. "Gogettum claims there's plenty in it for us all, once we're set."

"That's true." Costerman nodded. "We'll shake on our new partnership. After expenses are paid, Murphy, you and I will split fifty-fifty. There'll be plenty in it for us. You handle the strong-arm part, and I'll tend to the business details. I want to keep under cover as far as possible, as I told you. And now, I must be getting back."

The two criminal leaders joined hands in a murderous pact that spelled death and horror for Happy Valley.

"I seen that big Ranger skunk yesterday," remarked Comanche Ed. "Fact is I nearly got him, blast his hide, while he was hangin' down the cliff. I dunno what he was snoopin' there for. Later, he come after us, but we didn't get close to him. We had to work around and get over to meet Gogettum, so we ducked the big feller, and he swung off the other way."

"I can tell you what he was doing on the cliffs," Costerman said coldly. "He was checking on the cause of the landslide. And in case you're interested, Gogettum, he's already leary about how Ben Nolan died."

Gogettum swore hotly. "Why, the coyote! Say, he's too danged clever, Chief. The quicker he's outa the way, the better, says I."

Costerman nodded and turned, silently fading into the shadows.

Comanche Ed turned to Gogettum.

"What a feller, Gogettum!" he said admiringly. "He's as smart as yuh claimed, and more so. I'll be proud to call him my chief . . . Okay, Nebraska, call the boys and tell 'em to have their carbines and Colts ready for action. We'll hit the Valley jest 'fore dawn. I'll discourage them ranchers all right!"

NOT an hour later, Jim Hatfield sprang from his blanket, Colt flying to his hand. He never slept without a six-shooter close to his fingers, and he slept on a hair-trigger.

"Now what's that, Goldy?" he muttered, as the sorrel came to him and nosed him, sniffing uneasily.

Gray mist rose from the canyon that was Happy Valley, mists that came off the Green River, the stream which made the Valley a paradise.

From above, in the apex of the V canyon, came heavy gunfire and whoops on the night wind.

Hatfield grasped his saddle, which he had been using for a pillow, slapped it on the waiting sorrel's back, cinched up and took his rifle from its sling, checking all his guns to make sure they were ready for action. Then he hit leather without touching iron, and Goldy trotted down the slope toward Johnson City, the small town in the hollow.

"Sounds like a bandit raid," Jim mused, seeking to penetrate the mists with keen eyes.

It was the dark hour before dawn. The moon was down in the sky and floating gray vapors swirled about him, thick here, thin there, so that he could sometimes see a hundred yards or more. Reins in one hand, rifle gripped in the other, he urged the gelding on.

"Help—help!"

The cry came from off to his right and he veered toward a ranchhouse that loomed before him. A band of mustangs, startled and running full-tilt, galloped past him. More shouts from other sections of Happy Valley were going up.

Through the mist he glimpsed a ruby-red flare, a torch, and then another. Gunshots roared near at hand as he whirled up on Goldy and saw a half dozen men, in flat-topped green hats, shooting through the windows of a house. A couple had dismounted and were at the porch, down low, with flaming brands in their hands, just touching off some piles of straw they had pushed close to the dry wood.

The straw took fire, and flared up. Hatfield caught the flash of a gun from a window, and, on the porch, the still body of a cowboy who had tried to defend the home. A woman was screaming inside.

Comanche Ed Murphy's men were raiding the Valley!

CHAPTER IX

The Raiders

EVEN as he rode forward, Hatfield was throwing his rifle to his shoulder. His bullets whanged into the back of an outlaw who sought to make the fire beside the ranchhouse porch burn better, to smoke out the defenders.

Silent and deadly, Hatfield drove into the battle. One man with a torch threw up both hands and the brand flew from his grip and extinguished as it hit the dirt. The green-hatted arsonist arched back and Hatfield paid no further attention to him, for he knew he was dead.

He got the other with his second shot and the reports of his Winchester turned the attention of the bunched group on him. For a moment they had thought him another of their number coming up.

"Hey, who's that?" bawled an outlaw lieutenant in charge.

Guns turned, rising to pin the Ranger. He kept Goldy moving and their first volley missed him by yards. Hatfield emptied the rifle into them, the lead tearing at their flank. He thrust the Winchester back into its sling, whipped out his Colts.

They recoiled before his terrific onslaught, aim and nerve shaken by his deadly accuracy. Three were screaming with anguish, bitten by his bullets. Two lay dead by the burning straw. A rancher—it was Bill Calicott—ducked from the opening dor, a six-shooter in one hand and a bucket of water in the other. He dashed to the rail and threw the water over the pile of burning straw, for the wooden house was dry as tinder, and was rapidly catching.

Hatfield covered the settler as Calicott sought to extinguish the threatening flames. Another outlaw crashed from his horse, dead, full of Ranger bullets. The outlaw survivors, both wounded and unhurt, turned and fled before the fighting wrath of Jim Hatfield.

"Hey, there, Calicott!" roared Hatfield. "Get yore hoss and men and rally round the town pronto! Comanche Ed Murphy's struck the Valley. It's Jim Hart callin'. I'm with yuh!"

"All right, Jim," shouted Calicott.

Freed of the gang which had tried to smoke him and his sons out and kill them, Calicott hurried to obey Hatfield.

The sorrel flew over the uneven land. Hatfield followed the retreating outlaws he had cracked for a time, but yells and shots from another ranch drew him in another direction—toward Lee's place. Already the porch of the Lee ranchhouse was burning, while green-hatted devils rode back and forth, yelling, and shooting into the windows.

There were more of them, but Hatfield's bullets ripped the line. They swung on him, and he took cover at the side of a barn, aiming coolly and carefully, seldom wasting a shot. Lee and his brother were fighting from inside the house. At last, unable to stand Hatfield's crossfire, the outlaws turned and beat a slow retreat.

"C'mon out, Lee!" called Hatfield. "It's Jim Hart. Comanche Ed's gang has hit the Valley. Douse yore fire and rally at Johnson City, pronto! Call yore friends out!"

Whirling Goldy, he rode parallel to the winding road. Almost instantly attracted by the red glow of another burning object, he galloped up on another bunch of the chaparral killers. They had lighted a haystack for illumination in destroying a third ranch, and were framed perfectly for the Ranger, against its flare.

Colts freshly loaded as he approached, Hatfield blasted the small group of outlaws, driving them off. He pursued them, exchanging volleys of shots with them as they moved up the Valley in the dim light.

"Hey, Murph, Murph!" he heard a man yelling frantically. "There's the devil and all to pay over here! Hustle up!"

HATFIELD guessed that he had first run into advance raiding parties, sent out to start the fires and keep the inhabitants from rallying to

defense of the Valley, as Comanche Ed and his main gang followed more slowly, wiping everything out in their path.

Confusion hung over the canyon, and acrid wood smoke was mingling with the mists.

Gunfire, heavier than any he had yet heard, roared off to his left, and he made out the giant figure of Comanche Ed Murphy there, surrounded by his green-hatted men. The small party that he had been chasing swirled up to the main body of raiders, jerking their mustangs to a halt in the rising dust, as they reported to their bandit chief, the King of the Chaparral, pointing at Hatfield.

"It's that big jigger!" the Ranger heard one of them howl.

Comanche Ed roared in fury, and leaped on his great horse.

"C'mon, boys!" he bellowed. "Get him!"

Leaving the besieged house, where a man had been shot dead and another lay wounded in the front doorway, Comanche Ed Murphy started at Hatfield.

Jim Hatfield pulled the golden sorrel to a sliding stop, aware that he had run into more than he could handle now. There were forty men with Comanche Ed. They opened blasting fire on the Ranger, for they could make out his figure in the darkness.

He felt the burn of a bullet on the flesh of his left forearm. It stung horribly but did not feaze him. Nor did it prevent him from swift thinking and action that unerringly obeyed the mandates of his clever brain. There were some thick bushes nearby and he hastily made for them, where the raiders could not see him.

Murphy, eager to come up with his sworn arch-enemy, believed by John Costerman to be a Texas Ranger, dug his spurs deep into his big horse's flanks, shot forward from the pack, which came surging after him, howling like a pack of attacking, slavering wolves.

Coolly Hatfield waited, Colt in his right hand and ready. He could see them plainly, outlined for him against the light of the burning they had set.

"Here I am, Murphy!" he shouted.

Comanche Ed roared a curse and a threat, wheeling toward him, and several yards in front of his gang. That was what Hatfield had been maneuvering for—a chance to have it out, man to man and gun to gun, with the giant King of the Chaparral.

The Ranger's wide mouth was grim and his eyes darkened to the icy deep-green of an Arctic sea, as he raised his revolver, the hammer spur back under his long thumb. In that long, lean hand was the skill of a master, a genius trained by experience to the finest precision.

Comanche Ed Murphy was charging, and shooting into the darkness from which his enemy's voice had come. Confused yells and the staccato banging of six-shooters rose in a mad chorus as accompaniment to the death duel duet staged by the two men.

"I'll nail yore blasted hide to the fence—Ranger!" bellowed Murphy.

A bullet tore a hole in Hatfield's leather chaps, and he felt the searing heat of it on his flesh. But it did not throw him off as he took careful aim, determined to settle the murderous Comanche Ed once and for all.

His thumb was rising from the hammer-spur, with the big outlaw against the ruby glow of the fire set by Murphy's own hand.

THE mighty black stallion on whose back Comanche Ed rode gave a swift sideward leap, stumbling as his hoof broke through a bit of turf. Murphy, his powerful legs gripping the animal's ribs with the strength of a steel vise, was thrown forward at the waist, flattening out at the unexpected check in momentum. He ripped at his reins, yanking the curved, cruel Spanish bit in the black's mouth, cutting him and whipping the stallion's head and forequarters up by main strength.

"You black devil!" swore Murphy.

The stallion, in this brief flash of time, had stopped his forward motion. Hatfield's bullet, designed to hit Murphy in the upper part of the body, only drilled a hole in the outlaw's green Stetson, strapped tight about his jaw.

Compensating for the change in Comanche Ed's position by a quick shift of his gun that once more was cocked under his thumb, Hatfield fired a second time.

But as he again let go, Murphy's black stallion, infuriated and excited by the terrible bit, reared straight up into the air. The Ranger's bullet hit the horse under the left foreleg, drilling his heart.

Hatfield swore a hard oath at this quirk of fate which had cheated him of his prey.

The stallion died on his hind legs, all his muscles collapsing. Comanche Ed Murphy's great weight, locked to the leather—for the outlaw leader was a fine horseman—helped bring the dead horse down in a heap.

"Hey!" Murphy's startled cry was shut off as, realizing that his mount had been finished, he tried to free his booted feet from the stirrups and kick off. He was only partially successful. He crashed sideward, heavily, the horse pinning his legs, while his head and shoulders snapped with terrific force against the ground.

Comanche Ed, silent now, lay as he had fallen.

The Ranger's dangerous play, by which he had held himself out as a live bait to draw Murphy, had worked, but had not altogether succeeded. He could not say how badly Murphy was hurt, as the bandit horde swept up and enveloped their chieftain. A lanky man—it was Nebraska Fred Pease—took command, shouting orders.

"Pick up the boss, Tony and Hank! . . . C'mon! Get in and sieve that Ranger skunk!"

The big officer's position was untenable. Massed volleys were cutting the bushes which concealed him, and two or three nipped his clothing. Goldy jumped, snorting as his hide was burned.

"We gotta run, Goldy!" murmured Hatfield. He jerked a rein, and turned Goldy, zigzagging as he retreated.

They were coming, ravening for the blood and life of the great fighting officer who had downed their chief. Hatfield swung in his saddle and placed Colt slugs, as carefully as could be done at the jolting, uneven pace. Goldy was speeding like a golden arrow for Johnson City, drawing away from the line of outlaws, who kept stirrup to stirrup as they trailed him.

The range was long for a revolver. Besides, the foe was no longer against the light. Nebraska Pease was more cautious than Comanche Ed, and kept his men together. Perhaps, too, having seen the tall man they were pursuing in action, no individual among them desired to come up on him without plenty of help. The fall of Murphy had taken some of the vim out of them.

IN these few short minutes ticked off from eternity, as Jim Hatfield skilfully fought back at the gang, diverting it from the main purpose of destroying the Valley, ranch by ranch, the Ranger's quickly formulated plan of strategy had won. He had given the fighting men of the Valley time to rally together.

Ahead several torches, stuck in the earth, threw a flickering light over the plaza of the little settlement. Men shouted hoarsely, as they heard the outlaws approaching, and some of them hastily fired their weapons, the lead singing over and about Hatfield. They were unable to distinguish friend from foe in the still misty night.

"Hold that fire, Happy Valley!" roared the Ranger, as he galloped up the dirt road toward them. "It's Jim Hart, yore friend!"

Johnson Carter, an old Frontier Model six-shooter in one hand, sprang out in front of his friends.

"Stop shootin', boys!" he bellowed. "It's Hart! Hey, Sheriff Hart, this way!"

"This way, Sheriff!" Bill Calicott called, waving with his rifle, clutched in one hand.

"Huh—now I'm a sheriff," the Ranger thought quickly, wryly.

The outlaws, Murphy and Pease, had called him a Ranger. They had, somehow, guessed his office.

Calicott had acted quickly, after the Ranger had saved him from the band which had sought to destroy him and

his home. He had brought several fighting friends along to the rendezvous set by Hatfield. Now they were ready for the outlaw onslaught!

CHAPTER X

Night Mêlée

ABOUT twenty ranchers and cowboys, with Colts and rifles and shotguns ready, awaited Jim Hatfield there in the settlement.

"Enough to start with," he thought as he whirled in, hit the dirt, and, with his Colts in hand, swiftly disposed the settlers in position.

"Take the saloon, Carter! Lee, get yore men over by the store. Shoot to kill!"

Nebraska Pease and his followers veered and rode out into an Indian circle, whooping and firing in at them. Bullets thudded into the wooden and adobe walls, or tore holes in the windows. Hatfield, crouched between a barrell and the circular watering trough, made of thick adobe bricks and fed by a wooden pipe from Green River, worked his hot Colts skilfully.

He got a bandit through the head, knocking him off his mustang, dead before he struck dirt. He was trying for Pease, but the outlaw lieutenant was wary.. Nebraska did not seem anxious to share the fate of his chief, Comanche Ed.

"Doggone him," Hatfield muttered, watching for a chance at the lieutenant.

Pease hung back, although he was urging his men in to slaughter the settlers. Having taken cover at Hatfield's orders, they were giving a good account of themselves, even though outnumbered.

Fragments of brick from the trough rim spattered against Hatfield's cheek, bisected by the taut Stetson chinstrap. Other lead spurted up dust near his crouched body, or whistled in the air over him. The outlaws kept moving, riding a wild circle, screeching their hate, pouring bullets into

"S'long, Willy," sang out Murphy
(CHAPTER XVI)

the settlement, bullets that sought the flesh of the cowmen.

The night mists were drifting away, growing less palpable. Up over the high cliffs, Hatfield sighted a strip of gray in the sky, the first herald of dawn. In the confusion of the battle, with rifles and Colts roaring, ringing in his ears, the Ranger stayed cool. He knew that with the light, the outlaws must depart, having failed to smash the Valley men and kill them separately.

"There they go!" he muttered.

NEBRASKA could not stomach any more of the deadly gunfire aimed at him by Hatfield and the heartened Valley men. The defenders had cover, and although Pease had three to one superiority, whenever the circle drew in, bullets cut their flesh. Shaken at loss of Comanche Ed Murphy, Nebraska slowed.

"Pull away, boys!" he called out. "Pull away, yuh hear me!"

Hatfield straightened up, throwing lead after the retreating raiders as they broke the ring and started down the Valley. He whistled, shrill blasts that brought Goldy running up. Wise to gunfights, Goldy had stayed out of the plaza and the center of the flying slugs, awaiting his rider's call.

The Ranger hit leather and rode down the plaza, the line of buildings between him and the retreating outlaws.

Streaking out at the end, he heard Nebraska Pease, close at hand, yelling:

"Get goin'—get on back to camp! Dawn's nigh!"

"Look out, Fred!" shrieked a passing outlaw. "It's that big jigger!"

Nebraska Pease nearly jumped out of his leather seat. Convulsively he yanked his mustang around and saw the silent Ranger bearing straight down on him. Oblivious to the danger from the other killers, Hatfield drove on. The light was growing over the Valley.

"Yuh sidewinder!" snarled Pease, raising his Colt.

Jim Hatfield fired, straight into Pease's middle. Nebraska folded up, while his horse, feeling the sting of a slug, wildly leaped and bucked. Pease fell off, and the mustang started to run, dragging the man by one leg, which was tangled in the tapped stirrup.

The Ranger's bold insolent contempt as he rode right up to their temporary leader and killed him was the final straw for the outlaw riders. Instead of turning on him, their nerve broke and they became no longer a compact fighting force, but a mob of fugitives, each seeking to save his own skin. A few sent wild bullets at the tall avenger, but most of them dug in their spurs and rode full-tilt out of the Valley.

Hatfield paused, and looked back at Johnson City.

"C'mon, gents!" he shouted. "Mount and ride."

The settlers started for their horses, to follow Hatfield. The Ranger took the dusty trail, in the faint early dawn. It was possible to see farther now. He cut across a pasture, as scattered firing still sounded from points ahead of him.

Once a bullet ripped a hole in his Stetson crown, and he had to pull the sorrel out of line, hastily riding for shelter. He knew the shot had come from a rifle, by its whine.

In the grayness, Hatfield could distinguish a bunch of cattle huddled in a corner of a field, across the fence. A mounted man sat his horse, facing toward the Ranger, and he had a rifle in his hands. There was something familiar about him to Hatfield.

"Who's that?" called Hatfield, before shooting.

"Oh—is that you, Sheriff?"

The man came riding toward him, up to the fence, peering at him. It was Franklin Green, the Yankee who had transplanted himself to Texas and Happy Valley.

"Yeah, it's me," growled the Ranger.

"Say, I didn't mean to shoot at *you*," Green apologized quickly. "I thought it was more of them cow thieves."

"Yuh dang near took my ear off. C'mon! Get in line with us! We're fightin' off Comanche Ed Murphy's gang."

"Not me," Green said firmly. "I'm stayin' right here. They won't get my cows, blast 'em."

Johnson Carter, Bert Lee, Bill Calicott and their followers came galloping up to join the Ranger. Saying no other word to Green, Hatfield rode on at their head, out of Happy Valley.

The dense chaparral faced them as they cast up and down, seeking the outlaw trail, but good light did not come up for half an hour and the jungles were laced by many tracks, animal and human. Hatfield knew the difficulty of trailing men in the brush. Nor were the settlers eager to pursue the bandits far, because ambush was too easy in the blind thickets. Besides, they had little hope of overtaking the wild riders, who could split up and lead pursuers in dozens of different directions.

After a short run, the settlers and Hatfield turned and rode back to the Valley.

The dawn was now in full force. Eight dead outlaws lay in various parts of the Valley. Close to the town, Nebraska Fred Pease had been picked up, shaken off finally by his circling mustang. The corpse of Murphy's chief lieutenant was on the saloon porch. But Comanche Ed Murphy had been carried off in the darkness.

The ranch defenders took stock. Several had received minor wounds, but only two had been killed.

THEY gathered about the tall man.

"It'd have been a sight worse if yuh hadn't rallied us, Sheriff Hart," Johnson Carter said heartily, pumping the Ranger's hand. "Yuh saved our necks for us."

"He shore did!" confessed Ike McNally. "I was plumb rattled myownself."

"S'pose," Hatfield suggested, aware that hidden dangers must be exposed before Happy Valley would be safe, "we have some breakfast, gents, and then I'd like to talk to yuh. Come over to Carter's Slantin' C."

They split up, each rancher seeking his home, while Hatfield rode beside Johnson Carter toward the Slanting C.

"Why didn't yuh tell us yuh was a sheriff, Jim?" Carter asked. "We'da been glad to do anything we could to help."

"I'm not a sheriff, Carter."

Johnson Carter snapped his lips tight as he took in the silver star, set on a silver circle, nestling in Hatfield's steady hand.

"A Texas Ranger!" he exclaimed. "So that's it! I shoulda knowed it, the way yuh fought."

Hatfield returned the badge, emblem of his great organization, to its secret pocket snugged inside his shirt.

"Yuh might as well know," he informed Carter. "Comanche Ed and his men savvy I'm a Ranger. Mebbe they guessed it, or one of 'em bumped into me some time before. I always like to have a look-see at a place 'fore I shoot off my mouth, Carter. I'd be obliged if yuh'd keep it under yore hat just who I am. My name's Jim Hatfield and Cap McDowell sent me down here."

"Cap McDowell? Why, Ben Nolan used to talk about him a lot. They was pards in the War! And we've shore heard tell of you, Ranger Hatfield. But . . . How come McDowell sent such a famous feller as yoreself here?"

"He liked Nolan and was upset at Ben's death. And then, he wanted to make shore all you folks was all right. On the side, I'm after Comanche Ed."

Carter whistled. "After all, McDowell reckons yuh can take a mighty big bite, Ranger, sendin' yuh down here alone! Murphy's able to muster nigh onto a hundred men if need be."

They swung up the lane to the Slanting C. Redness tinged the sky over the mighty cliffs, as the two men dismounted and took the saddles off their lathered horses.

"Father, is Steve with you?"

Hatfield, having cared for Goldy, turned and nodded to Bee Carter. She gave him a fleeting smile. His rugged manhood always attracted women, and they were as impressed as men by his power.

Bee was worried. Her forehead was corrugated and her red lips drawn up.

"No, I ain't seen him," replied Car-

ter. "But don't worry. He'll be along soon, Bee. Reckon he rode outa the way of them outlaws."

Carter, roused by the night alarm, was tired from the fight. He was not as young as he once was, and he walked with a stiff, weary gait into the house.

Gary Lait, leaning on his crutch, stood by the doorway.

"What happened, Carter?" he cried. "Was it a bandit attack?"

"Shore was. But we beat the coyotes off. Got eight of 'em, thanks to Jim Hat—Hart."

"Good, good."

The lame man was relieved. He was unable to put any weight on his injured foot. Following Carter across the room, he thumped along on his makeshift crutch.

Hatfield touched Bee's soft arm.

"Bee," he asked softly, "how long since yuh seen Steve?"

She looked up into his level, gray-green eyes.

"I haven't seen him since he rode off yesterday morning."

JIM HATFIELD was startled, but he hid it, so as not to alarm the girl any more than she was already.

"I seen him up above, Bee," he said. "I believe he camped out near his home. Yuh know we found his father's body."

She nodded, her eyes clouded with anxiety.

"I wish he'd come back," she murmured.

"He will—don't worry. I'll go fetch him right quick."

"Thank you. You're mighty kind, Jim."

Hatfield felt deeply for her. Bee Carter was a beautiful, loving young creature, a prize that any man could count himself most fortunate to win. For a moment he envied Steve Nolan and the love of a girl such as Bee. But he thrust aside this emotion. In the grim, savage life he led, fighting for Texas against the guns and brains of cunning outlaws, there was no place for a wife. His roof was the vast dome of the heavens, his resting place wherever he chanced to be.

CHAPTER XI

Another Mule Train

GOING inside, where the lame Lait sat, Hatfield saw Johnson Carter waiting for his breakfast. Mrs. Carter was busy in the kitchen and Bee joined her to help.

"Reckon we taught them bandits a lesson they won't soon forget," Carter was proudly boasting.

Jim Hatfield did not reply. The fierce attack on Happy Valley, coupled with what he had ferreted out concerning Ben Nolan's murder and the blasting of the high cliffs, made him suspicious that a deeper motive was involved than simply that Murphy's gang had struck to steal cattle and destroy with wanton abandon.

"I'll try to take a couple of Murphy's men prisoner," he mused. "Mebbe they'll talk and clear it up."

Politely he helped the injured Lait to the table, and they ate—fried bread and meat washed down by steaming hot coffee. To the Ranger, it tasted fit for a king.

Comfortably fed, he lit up a smoke and soon the men of Happy Valley began trooping in.

"Gents," Hatfield began, when they were assembled and seated, "yuh all savvy how Comanche Ed hit yuh this mornin'. And these cliffs hangin' over yore heads don't seem none too safe. They was rumblin' again last night. It's my idea that yuh'd all be a lot better off if yuh left yore homes."

A murmur of discontent arose.

"That's what I been tryin' to tell the dumb fools," Franklin Green cried, the only one who seemed eager to leave the Valley. "We can drive off our stock and follow with our belongin's in wagons to that new site!"

"I wasn't meanin' for yuh to give up yore valley," Jim Hatfield said. "My notion is yuh could make a temporary camp and keep yore women and children in it till we get this thing straightened out. Another attack like last night, and Murphy's outlaws may wipe yuh out. But banded together,

yuh can keep sentries on duty while the rest sleep. If yuh pitch yore camp in that wide space at the lower end of the canyon yuh'll be fairly safe from fallin' rocks. Later I mean to see if them looser parts of the walls can't be blasted down to keep any big landslides from catchin' yuh."

"Now that's what I call a real idea," agreed Johnson Carter enthusiastically. "Gents, I think we should take Jim's advice, and pronto. We'll spread canvas for the women and kids and the men can sleep in their blankets. In that way we're safe from Murphy and from the cliffs, too."

A vote was taken and all favored Hatfield's shrewd scheme, with the exception of Franklin Green, who was still set on the change to the new land.

"Okay, then," Carter said. "Go home and fetch what yuh got to have, boys, and we'll get set."

Having placed the settlers in a position of comparative safety, as he thought, the Ranger felt free to continue his personal investigation.

"Yuh better send out men to hunt Steve Nolan, Carter," he advised the Valley chief. "He may be just huntin' for meat, but if he went up top the cliffs, he mighta run into trouble."

If he had, of course, Hatfield realized there was scant chance of tracing Nolan in the wild labyrinths.

"Yeah, I mean to do that right away," Carter said gravely. "Steve ain't the kind to sashay off just for fun. But it's like huntin' a needle in a big haystack to locate a man up there if he don't want to be found or is bein' hid by somebody."

"I'd go myself and hunt him," Hatfield said, "but I figger I better work fast, Carter. I got plenty to do."

HE shook hands with Carter, who was in a hurry to start on the Ranger's plan.

Bee Carter washed Hatfield's wounds and placed fresh bandages on them. None was serious enough to slow him down. His hickory-and-steel muscles, filled with the resilience of youth and power, his fighting will, enabled him to ignore injuries that would have laid an ordinary man low.

He rubbed Goldy down and gave the sorrel a light feed of oats. Replenishing his supply of ammunition, for his blue-steel Colts, and for his rifle, loading them after a careful cleaning, Hatfield waved to Bee, who was anxious-eyed about Nolan. Mounting, he rode out of the Valley.

His intention was to head for Comanche Ed's secret camp and try to capture an informer or two, always good strategy. Murphy and his gang of outlaws were plainly connected with the evil forces seeking to drive the settlers from Happy Valley. Hatfield was feeling around, seeking to identify the figures behind Murphy and his men, sure in his mind that there were others, or another.

"If I get there quick, mebbe they won't have shifted yet," he mused.

A shrewd leader, he was aware, would have moved his base camp after the Ranger's flying visit there. But he hoped to make it before this occurred. Murphy must have been stunned, at least, in his fall, and if Hatfield hurried, he might get the jump on them.

The tremendous granite walls hemmed in the canyon, towering into an azure sky, casting black shadows over Happy Valley as the swift golden gelding took his rider on. The Ranger looked back, once, at the lovely, green valley, an oasis in the seared chaparral wastes.

"It's worth havin'," he muttered, "and worth fightin' for!"

A curve hid the Valley from him and he hit the back road.

"Now where's it all pan out?" he mused, as the sorrel took him at a smart clip through the winding chaparral trail. "I need more 'fore I can see it clear."

He was worried about Steve Nolan's disappearance. If Nolan had been near the Valley, he would have heard the heavy gunfire and come in. However worried he was, the Ranger felt that he must, as quickly as possible, check the mad rampages of Comanche Ed Murphy.

Besides, hunting a man in the wilderness atop the great cliffs was practically hopeless, with no clue to fol-

low. The day before, when he had left Nolan and tried to track Murphy, whom he had seen on the rim, he had been unable, skilful as he was, to come up with the Chaparral King. There were too many hiding places and too many crisscrossing trails, beaten by many hoofs.

So now he sped on and, as the noon sun beat down on him, he passed the spot where he had had his first brush with Murphy's trail watchers. Continuing, he rode close to the spot where he had surprised the outlaw camp. He left the sorrel behind the rise, and crept forward on foot.

Cautiously peeking over into the hollow, he realized at once that the bandits had fled. The camp was deserted, only the shacks they had thrown up for shelter remaining.

"Shucks," he muttered. "I reckon they figgered I'd be back, and sashayed."

He shrugged, for he was not greatly surprised they had changed camps after he had come upon them. He had only hoped the bandits would not act so quickly to cover themselves.

REMOUNTING, Jim Hatfield rode past the old hideout, and slowly proceeded along the winding chaparral trail. Up and down it ran, through dangerously thick and curving miles. After a time, he hid Goldy in the depths of a thicket and climbed to the top of a high rock bluff from which he could look out for several miles over the Nueces jungles. He hoped in this way to sight some smoke or catch a sign that would betray the bandits' position to him.

For a time his keen eyes swept the terrain, without any luck. He was on the point of descending when a scintillating flash far off to his right caught his attention.

"Sun on metal, movin' metal," he decided, and watched.

The metal might be a gun barrel carelessly exposed, a silver spur, or a trapping on a horse's bridle. It had shown, not on the trail he had been following, but on another threading through the bush some distance away.

When he glimpsed it again, minutes later, he knew which way whoever it was was moving. Going back to Goldy, he mounted and sought a cross path that would bring him nearer.

An hour after he had noted the first flash, Hatfield, crouched in the thick mesquite, saw the van of the train round the turn into his field of vision. Two Mexican riders, in high-peaked sombreros and velvet clothes, trimmed by silver conchas, led the mule train. Others, Mexicans and Texans, rode the line between the walls of thorned bush.

Aparejos hung on either side of each mule, which bulged with weight as the beasts plodded along. The flaps were closed so the Ranger could not tell what they carried. He observed the hard faces of the drivers, but did not recognize any of them as Murphy's green-hatted devils.

A blacksnake whip with a leaded rawhide twenty feet long snapped in the dusty air over the mules, wielded by a dark-faced Mexican with a sallow, pockmarked face, a curved, thin nose and an ink-black mustache.

"Get on!" he was yelping. "Get on!"

It was Chihuahua Juan, in charge of another train. Hatfield had not seen the Mexican driver before, but ticketed the cruel features in his photographic brain for further attention.

Whipping at the mules, Chihuahua Juan's terrible lash, which could cut a man to ribbons at fifteen paces, chanced to flick a leaded tippet into the eye of a mule which had turned its head just at the instant the whip struck. Crazed with pain, the animal shied and threw its mouse-colored body aside, falling to its knees. Others behind it piled up on the mule and one of the *aparejos* broke loose, spilling its contents on the trail.

Cursing with fury, the Mexican spurred in to straighten out the mess, his lash cracking with reports as sharp as pistol-fire. The leather bag was righted and refastened, closed, and the train moved on.

Hatfield, who had watched this byplay from his hiding place in the chaparral, stole out on the constricted trail when they were around the turn, and found several chunks of the gray-

ish-white, crushed rock which he had discovered at the scene of the ambush on his way in. They were, to his expert eye, the same kind of material.

He stared after the long train, headed toward the Gulf coast.

"Now if they're honest," he mused, "why didn't they report that raid I saw on their other pack-train to the law? Wonder if Murphy's men 'll hit 'em *this* time?"

Back along the way the train had come lay the fastnesses of the heavily bushed mountains towering on one side of Happy Valley. Blasting powder, which had been used to blow down the cliff over Ben Nolan's house, suggested to Hatfield some sort of mining operations. Miners would possess large quantities of such explosives.

"Mebbe they're blastin' at night," he thought, for he had learned in Happy Valley that most of the rumblings the settlers heard took place after dark.

This, of course, might have been explained by natural contractions caused by cooling of rock masses after the hot sunlight had passed, but Jim Hatfield was inclined to doubt that.

"Hafta locate that mine," he decided, "but first I got to check up on that train."

He was thorough and did not miss any opportunity to clarify points during his investigations. Failure to do so might prove fatal.

Returning to Goldy who, warned to keep quiet, awaited him in the chaparral, he rode slowly after the train, well knowing that unforeseeable strange dangers might threaten ahead.

CHAPTER XII

Seagoing Ranger

IT was dark when Jim Hatfield rode the golden sorrel into the Gulf port of Indianola, the bustling cattle shipping point on Matagorda Bay.

To this the mysterious pack-train had led him, after two days of steady going and a night during which the

Hatfield tore the gun from the bandit (CHAPTER XVI)

Mexican boss had permitted but a short rest to his men. Hatfield saw the mules driven to a pier, where a black ship was wrapped, patched sails cluttering her masts and a small smokestack in the rear—auxiliary steam. The decks were lit and heavy planks had been laid so that the mules could be driven onto the ship and their loads dumped into the open hold.

It would take some time to complete this, and Hatfield turned and hunted a livery stable, where he might give Goldy a good rubdown and see that his golden sorrel was properly fed. Here he left his heavy chaps and spurs, and strode out, after Goldy's needs were attended to.

Indianola was howling in its prime, surrounded by packeries, carbon factories that burned cattle and other animal bones, hide-and-tallow plants, industries connected with the trade of Texas. Hundred of oil lamps and candles in brackets threw a yellow glow over the sandy, rutted streets.

Raucous music rang from waterfront saloons in which sailors mingled with the bronzed riders of the cattle empire, and with various demi-monde folk who preyed upon them.

The salty tang of the breeze that blew in off the Gulf and the big Bay was strange to the Ranger's flared nostrils. It was damp, and odorous with the breath of the sea. To this and similar Gulf ports, ranchers often drove their beeves for sale. Ships took the animals to New Orleans and other markets or, when the price per head was low, the packeries and hide factories got them.

Interested in the town, with its strange contrasts, the Ranger went into one of the waterfront places, downed a drink and a quick meal. Painted women smiled at the mighty officer, and weasel-eyed men, after a look at the great fighting man, decided to seek elsewhere for a victim. Sailors and cowmen lined the long bar, sawdust was on the floor, music was in the rear, and a gambling annex ran wide-open.

Finishing his food and drink, Hatfield returned to the docks. From the shadows of a warehouse, he watched the captain of the ore ship as the black-bearded seaman, by the light of a swinging lantern, signed a delivery receipt for the Mexican. The mules stood in a bunch on the pier, unloaded, surrounded by their drivers. Business done, Chihuahua Juan led his men and train off. They would spend the night in town.

After they were gone, Hatfield strolled toward the gang-plank. On the deck, the bearded master of the ship, the *Mermaid*, was bawling orders to his crew. They were preparing to cast off. Hatfield went quickly up the plank and saluted the captain.

The black-bearded seaman wore a blue wool jersey, tar-stained pants and sea boots. An officer's cap was cocked on his untidy dark hair. He looked with suspicious, liquor-reddened eyes at Hatfield, who took in the man's curved nose, slashed by an ugly crimson scar from some long-past knife fight, the yellow snags visible between his parted, snarling lips, fringed by the black beard. The captain was tough, no doubt of that, but many such seadogs were. They had to be, to control the riffraff who shipped as hands on the small, dilapidated coastwise vessels.

"Howdy," drawled Hatfield. "Where yuh bound, Cap'n?"

"What's it to you?" snapped the master of the *Mermaid*.

HOWEVER, looking up into the rugged face and calm gray-green eyes of Jim Hatfield, he moderated his voice. He was shorter than the Ranger, but his body was wide all the way down to his sea boots and his fists were as gnarled and hard as oak knots.

"I was hopin' to get passage to N' Orleans."

"We ain't makin N' Orleans this trip."

"What's that rock yuh're totin'?"

The captain scowled, but Hatfield had a way with him.

"Ballast ore," the seaman replied shortly. He swung, cursing with brimstone fury at a stupid sailor who had bungled some slight task. "Get that Number Three Hatch closed, yuh danged farmers! Pipe it up, blast yore souls to hot tarnation-and-gone!"

"Ballast ore, huh?" mused Hatfield. "They shore fetch it a long way!"

The mate hurried up the deck.

"Cap'n Kennet, we're ready."

"Very good, Mate. I'll take her out."

Captain Kennet swung past Hatfield, but he looked back over his meaty shoulder and called:

"If yuh wanta wait, cowboy, I'll be back by tomorrer night and I expect to make N' Orleans my next run."

"Thanks," replied the Ranger.

Sailors were busy on the deck that was crowded with paraphernalia. The low throb of the auxiliary engine had begun, shivering the warped timbers of the *Mermaid*. Hatfield started for the gangplank but, making sure he was not observed, he glided in the shadows of the superstructure to a door in the middle of the ship, and slipped in.

The small saloon was dingy and dark, and he felt his way along a partition. A table, bolted to the deck, stood in front of a long bench built

to the wall. Hatfield stretched himself at full length on the bench, hidden by the top of the table.

It was not long before the *Mermaid* began moving, her timbers groaning and creaking ominously. They were under way. No one came into the little cubbyhole which Hatfield had appropriated. The captain's quarters were aft, while the crew bunked forward, although as they were working out of the harbor now, most of them were on deck.

Lightly dozing, lulled by the gentle rolling of the *Mermaid* on the low waves of Matagorda, the seagoing Texas Ranger spent the night. . . .

The sun was up when the ship's engine was put into neutral. Soon Hatfield, alert and watching from a dirty port, saw the sailors casting ropes onto a pier. The *Mermaid* had made port at an island in the big Bay. Smoke issued from the stacks of a low building near at hand and piles of the grayish-white ore were stacked on the rough wharf.

AS the sounds of the ship died off, the Ranger could hear the dull *thud* of a stamp mill. Intrigued, he made ready to go ashore. He did not wish to appear conspicuous, so transferred his gun-belt inside his shirt and, rolling his big hat into a compact cylinder, shoved it into the belt.

The bearded captain was walking up the path from the pier, toward a square wooden shack that had "OFFICE" marked on its front. Hatfield slipped out on deck and rounded the deck house. A sailor spied him, but did not try to stop him. He seemed to think that the tall man was from the island. The Ranger watched his chance and went down the gang-plank. They were already beginning to unload the ore into barrows that could be wheeled to the refinery.

Coolly Hatfield strolled nearer the place. In the air was the burnt odor of smelting. The captain of the *Mermaid* had gone into the office, and the Ranger avoided that place. He turned aside and stepped into the large building, where workmen were busy at various tasks.

THE Ranger's trained engineer's eye identified the big stamp mills, weighing around five hundred pounds each, that ground the grayish-white ore into fine powder. This, he found, as he nervily walked through the plant —the workmen eyed him but did not attempt to interfere—was mixed with carbon and washed, the product black as ink. Next the stuff went into mechanical roasters which heated it to molten state. An air blast roared down the line, as the dressed ore was smelted in the furnaces.

It was at the final stage that Jim Hatfield spent more time than at the others, his mining engineering training coming in handy. The molten metal was run off into containers, and men with heat shields stirred it constantly with wooden poles of apple wood. Great bubbles were thus brought out, and then the hot stuff was ladled out into ingot pans and allowed to harden.

The cooled bars were stored in a small annex at the farther end of the refinery, which was smelly and hot from the chemical processes going on, and the stamp mills deafened everyone within hearing.

Watching his chance, Hatfield entered the storeroom and examined the finished product. The bars were a beautiful, pure white, with a slight blue tinge as they caught the light from the windows. Hatfield picked up one from a cool stack, his curiosity roused to boiling point. He had begun to suspect what the metal was.

Taking the ingot to the window and, placing it against his knee, he bent it in his powerful hands. It gave off a grating sound, almost like a thin human cry.

"Well, I'll be doggoned!" he muttered. "That's it!"

Then he turned quickly, for someone had come up behind him. The noises of the refinery had drowned out the light steps as the man approached and caught the Ranger examining the metal bar.

"I sye, 'oo in bloody blazes are you?" he demanded angrily.

The accent told Hatfield his inquisitor was British. The man was

stout and had a large head, fringed by red hair, prematurely bald on top. He wore blue pants and "store" shoes, a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up. A yellow pencil was perched on one ear.

"Howdy, suh," Hatfield said calmly.

"You put that down!" insisted the other. "'Oo said you could come 'ere? I'm the manager hof this plant hand—"

"I'm not a thief," broke in Hatfield.

He replaced the ingot, facing the manager whose face and bald spot had gone red as a beet.

"You're a bloody spy, that's what you h'are!" he shouted.

He swung to the door, as though to call for help. The Ranger grabbed his arm, to pull him back. He clapped a quick hand over the man's mouth, to shut him up, for he did not fancy a fight single-handed on this island. He pulled the door shut, and backed the manager into a corner, holding him in his viselike grip.

The hum of the working factory covered the sounds they made, the scuffle of feet, the muffled grunts of the fat manager.

"Easy, I tell yuh," snapped Hatfield, as the fellow lashed out at him, hitting him in the stomach with his fists. "I don't aim to hurt you or anybody here. I'm an investigator, a lawman."

THE washed-out blue eyes of the Britisher widened, and he stopped fighting for a moment, stiffening in Hatfield's hold. He looked frightened.

"I'll let yuh loose if yuh'll behave," the Ranger said in his ear. "But if yuh yell or fight me again, I'll hafta stop yuh."

The manager, trembling violently, nodded, and Hatfield took his hand from the man's lips.

"Oh, I sye—the police!" The fellow was scared into respect. "I told Costerman we couldn't keep h'it quiet long!"

"Who's that?"

"'E's our chief, runs the 'ole shebang . . . Say, 'aven't you a connection with the Yard?"

"Yuh mean Scotland Yard?" Like all good lawmen, Hatfield knew of the famous English detective bureau. "No, I ain't exactly connnected with 'em, but they'd be glad to hear from me, I reckon. They savvy this Costerman, I take it?"

The manager's eyes narrowed. In his first fright he had given himself away, and now he began to regret it. The tall man seemed unarmed and, though he was strong of muscle, the manager decided he was, after all, only a local lawman, and alone at that.

Hatfield did not miss the narrowing of the manager's lids. He guessed the man was looking for an opening.

"If yuh tell me the truth 'bout all this," he said, "I'll help yuh, mister."

But though he was fearful of the big Ranger, another dread was in the bald-pated fellow's head.

"Costerman'll kill me for talking," he blurted.

Hatfield jumped back, as the door banged in. A workman entered, carrying a load of the shining white ingots. He walked between the Ranger and the manager, and the red-headed Britisher quickly seized this chance to whip a revolver from his pocket.

The workman's jaw dropped when he saw the gun. He let the tray of bars fall, with a crash, to the dirt floor.

"Hey, what's all this?" he began.

Hatfield leaped aside, hitting the door shut again as the plant manager hastily pulled the trigger of his pistol. It was a light-caliber revolver and the noise it made was not loud. The bullet, designed for the swift-moving Ranger, bit a chunk of flesh from the workman's head. He folded up on top of his metal load.

Hatfield, body down, pushed off with his feet, lunging up and in, silent as an attacking panther. His steel fingers got hold of the manager's fat wrist, threw up the gun. The manager's bones cracked as his fingers were caught in the trigger-guard. He uttered a short scream, then Hatfield hit him with the long barrel of the Colt he drew from inside his shirt.

He struck square on the bald pate, laying the revolver on the manager's skull. The fat man folded up under him and lay still, a bluish-red streak visible on his head.

"Doggone, he thought I was here to arrest him," he muttered, staring down at the unconscious figure. "I s'pose him and this Costerman, his boss, are wanted by the law in England."

CHAPTER XIII

Escape

WITHOUT a helping hand, on the island in Matagorda Bay, surrounded by many potential enemies with no way of escape, Jim Hatfield figured a way out. He knelt to examine the workman. The scalp wound was not serious.

Swiftly he went to work and with strips of shirt torn from the clothing of the two, he bound and gagged the manager and the other man. It did not take long, when he had them tied up, to hide them behind the stacks of bluish-white metal.

With the roar of the refinery ringing in his ears, Hatfield took a cautious look out the annex door. Nobody seemed excited and the workmen were at their various tasks down the floor. He stepped outside, shut the door behind him, and strolled back the way he had come.

The bearded ship's captain was at the dock, and Hatfield lurked among the palm trees fringing the sandy beach, watching his chance to get back on the ship.

They were dumping out the ore, while barrows of the stuff were being wheeled up to the refinery by island laborers, a poor looking gang of Negroes, Mexicans, with a scattering of Nordics.

Hatfield waited until the unloading was finished, and heard the mate sing out the information. The captain went on deck, and disappeared forward. Hatfield hurried around, picked up a wheelbarrow from the bunch near the buildings, and trundled it along to the dock, where he was able to work close to the gang-plank. When the mate was looking the other way, the Ranger went aboard and started around the deck house to the saloon.

The captain came out of the wheelhouse forward, and as Hatfield passed from the deck, into the saloon, he swung that way and saw the Ranger's tall figure jump for the opening.

"Hey, you!" the captain sang out.

The mate, obeying orders given him by the captain as the latter went abroad ship, was casting off.

The captain came rolling at full-speed down the narrow deck toward the saloon, a hand thrust into his back pocket. He stuck his head inside and saw the tall man standing there, watching him.

Entering the cabin, the sailor scowled at the Ranger.

"So it's you," he growled suspiciously. "How'd you get here?"

"Rode over with yuh last night, Cap'n," the Ranger said pleasantly, "and I'm ridin' back."

"Oh, is that so?"

The captain kept his hand in his rear pocket. Either he had a gun or a knife there, and Hatfield watched him carefully.

"I don't mean any harm, Cap'n," he said evenly. "Just take me back to Indianola."

The captain was uncertain as to what he should do next, for the tall fellow was doing no harm that he could see.

"What's yore game?" he asked.

"What's yores?" continued the Ranger.

Through the open door Hatfield could see the intensely blue water of the Gulf, with the golden streamers of the glorious sun shining upon the mighty sea. Under them the engines picked up the beat, and the *Mermaid* shivered with the powerful throbbing.

The ship began to move, slowly, from the pier.

But a sudden shouting arose from the island. Men yelled raucously in the warming air. Over the sounds of the ship they could hear the calls:

"Hey, Cap'n Kennet—Cap'n Kennet! Wait, stop the ship!"

HATFIELD and Kennet both glanced out the port. The bald-topped manager, the new mark where

Hatfield's pistol had been laid visible on his pate, was galloping toward the dock, waving both arms in the air, a pistol in one hand. Behind him, armed with shotguns, rifles and steel bars came a mob of workmen, all hunting for the Texas Ranger.

The *Mermaid* was not far from the pier but the gap was too far to jump. Then the manager reached the pier.

"What's wrong, Slattery?" Kennet sang out.

"Did you see 'im—the big chap with black 'air?" shrieked Slattery. "'E conked me, Kennet, blast 'im. Where h'is 'e?"

"He's—" began Captain Kennet.

In his back pocket was a pistol, and he still had his hand on it. At his belt hung a long-bladed, razor-sharp sailor's knife. However, as he had turned to look out the port to see what the ruckus was all about, Captain Kennet had failed to guard his back. His face was red under his black beard and he was cursing as he turned his head, and looked up into the steady Ranger eyes.

"Tell 'em I ain't aboard, Kennet," order Hatfield calmly, keeping out of sight at the side. "I'll shoot yuh if yuh give me away."

"Why, yuh—" snarled Kennet.

But the black muzzle hole of the blue-steel Colt was pointed at his vitals, and the hand holding it was steady as fate.

"Go on, sing out yuh ain't seen me," prodded Hatfield.

Kennet had to obey. He stuck his head through the open port and called to Slattery:

"He ain't aboard my ship, Slattery, or I'd know it. I ain't seen anybody like that."

"Turn back—we better search 'er," Slattery insisted, galloping to the end of the pier.

"Like sin I will!" replied Kennet. "Mebbe he's on the island. See yuh next trip."

The mate was looking down from the window of the wheel-house forward.

"Want I should turn back, Cap'n?" he called.

"No, keep goin', Mate," Kennet bawled, aware of the insistent Colt at his back.

The *Mermaid* slowly pulled out, leaving the isle behind, swinging across the deep-blue waters. . . .

* * * * *

STEVE NOLAN, exasperated by the annoying toss of Fate's dice which had dismounted him many miles from Happy Valley and home, stroked Blueboy's silky neck, talking aloud to his beloved horse.

"Never mind, Blueboy. That tendon'll get well, shore it will. Then yuh can tote me again."

Like all cowboys, young Nolan loved his mount better than he did himself. Blueboy was a fine animal, of blooded strain, and was precious to Steve Nolan.

Pursued doggedly by a bunch of Comanche Ed's gang and some of the men who had killed the Mexican peon, Nolan had been run until dark, farther and farther away from where he wanted to go. This had not worried him unduly for he had been able to stay ahead, through Blueboy's superior ability and his own good riding.

When night had fallen, his pursuers had quit the chase. Nolan had started a wide circle, meaning to reach Happy Valley from the other side and so elude them in the dark. Everything had gone smoothly until, descending a sandy slope, a stone had rolled under Blueboy's hoof, and, with Steve's weight on him, the horse had broken through into a pit.

When they reached the bottom, and started on more level ground, Blueboy was limping. Nolan immediately dismounted and felt the horse's forelegs. Blueboy showed that the left one hurt him, and Nolan, who would rather injure himself than a horse, unsaddled his mount, rubbed him down, and turned him loose. Blueboy would not go far from him.

Nolan slept with his saddle for a pillow, the blanket over him. At dawn he was up. Blueboy came at his soft call, nuzzling his hand. He was still limping, and Nolan swore. He lifted Blueboy's hoof, and carefully examined the strained leg.

"I'll hafta walk," he muttered. Not

for anything would he put weight on the wounded animal. That might ruin Blueboy permanently. "Yuh stay here till yuh feel like comin' home, Blueboy," he ordered, patting the powder-blue neck. "That'll get well if yuh go easy on it, savvy?"

Blueboy sniffed. He seemed to understand what was wished. Nature would keep him, unless forced, from using the injured leg until it was in shape. Steve Nolan bade his horse good-by and, shouldering his Western saddle, started to walk. His spurs impeded him, so he took them off. Blueboy followed him for a time but then stopped, dropping his head to graze and rest the injured leg.

Nolan kept on, over rough country, heavily wooded. There were cactus flats and mesquite ridges to cross. He was as hard as nails and, while not used to walking, he was young and strong. The saddle was heavy on his broad shoulders but he was inured to hardship. The Valley lay miles ahead and he proceeded cautiously, not wishing to bump into Comanche Ed or any of the other enemies who seemed, he did not understand why, to be thirsting for his blood.

He trudged all day under the hot sun, pausing only now and again for a drink from Green River which, up here near its source, was a swift, rock-bedded mountain torrent. It was not until the Green roared over its falls into the upper end of Happy Valley that it slowed down to a more sedate flow, irrigating the land instead of washing the silt away.

It was late that afternoon before Nolan descended the steep rock steps near the falls. In the canyon, he soon came upon some of his own horses and caught a tamer animal, saddling it. Riding for the Slanting C, Carter's spread, he was surprised to find that the homes and even the settlement of Johnson City were deserted. And when he came to the Carter place it, too, was empty of humans, although there were animals about.

Greatly puzzled, and alarmed as well, Nolan turned his horse and followed the road down the Valley.

Ranger Jim Hatfield Rides in Guns A-roarin' When a Savage Murder Conspiracy Plays Havoc with the Lives and Fortunes of the Residents of the Enchanted Mesa

IN

LONE STAR WRATH

A Smashing Complete Action Book-Length JIM HATFIELD Novel

By

JACKSON COLE

FEATURED IN THE NEXT ISSUE

Soon, at a turn, someone called to him, a familiar voice that made his heart leap with gladness. Bee Carter came spurring up to him, mounted on a paint horse with the slanted C brand on its pretty body.

"Steve!" she cried. "Steve!"

He pushed his mustang close to hers, and put an arm around her slim waist. Tears were in the girl's eyes as he leaned over to kiss her.

"Oh, you're all right, aren't you, Steve?" She held him tightly, couldn't let him go. "I was sick with worry. What happened to you?"

"Some of Comanche Ed's bandits run me back into the mountains, Bee. I shook 'em off after dark, but Blueboy went lame and I had to hoof it home. But what's wrong with the Valley?"

"Terrible things have happened since you left," Bee replied, and told him of the murderous raid. "It was that big man, Jim Hart, who saved us all. He advised us to camp together for protection at the lower end of the Valley, Steve. We've got a barricaded tent village there, food and plenty of ammunition, and we're keeping a guard out. We're safer from the rocks there, too. Come on! It isn't far—just below Lee's Bluff. I was out, hoping against hope you might come home safe. I was afraid the outlaws had shot you!"

CHAPTER XIV

Shanghaied

YOUNG STEVE NOLAN rode beside his sweetheart, and they swung the narrow turn under the Bluff. Out on the flat, along the river bank, was the camp of the Valley folk, canvas stretched on poles and blankets, baskets and boxes of food, including the new tinned goods which had swept the country like a rage, piled under brush and tarpaulin shelters.

Big logs and rocks formed a rough barricade. Children played on the river bank, their shrill voices joyous in the warm afternoon air. Pioneer women were busy preparing the evening meal, and the odor of cooking beef and grits reached Nolan's nostrils.

"I'm starved, Bee," he told her. "Ain't had a good meal since yesterday breakfast when I left yuh."

"I'll fix you something right away, dear. I'm so glad to see you I just can't stand it!"

The two dismounted, turning their unsaddled horses out to forage and, after another welcoming kiss, they strolled, the handsome young man with an arm about Bee's waist, to the main camp. Valley men, their friends and relatives, lounged about or worked, although some were off seeing to their cattle and other stock, which had, for the most part, been driven to a point of safety near the camp.

"Howdy, Steve!" sang out Johnson Carter, jumping up from his grassy seat and pumping Steve's hand. "Where in tarnation yuh been? We hunted yuh for three hours this mornin'. Mighty glad yuh're back, yuh young rapscallion!" Carter slapped him jovially on the back.

Nolan had to tell his story all over again, to the group of men, women and children who gathered about him. Gary Lait, the guest of the Carters, limped painfully over on his crutch, and Franklin Green, Bert Lee, Calicott and other friends listened while Nolan explained his disappearance.

"Where's Jim?" he asked, when he had finished and they had shaken his hand, congratulating hm on his narrow escape.

"He rode off—said he'd be back," replied Carter. "We mean to stay here till he does come back. He figgers on testin' the cliffs for us and blastin' away dangerous sections, Steve. He knows a lot 'bout such work, minin' and all. He's one smart hombre."

"He shore is, and a fine feller," agreed Nolan enthusiastically.

"Shucks," growled Green, frowning. "In my opinion, folks, we oughta be on our way to that new site."

"Dry up," snapped Bert Lee. "Can't yuh take no for an answer, Green? I'm sick of yuh."

"Lait, you agree with me, don't you?" asked Green, turning to the lame man. "These fools should move."

Gary Lait smiled. "The Valley seems dangerous, it's true," he replied gently. "But it's hard to leave home, I guess. When my foot's well, I aim to head for *my* home. In the meantime, I'm mighty thankful to yuh all for helpin' me. It's none of my business, me bein' an outsider. But mebbe if yuh wait till yuh hear from Jim Hart, yuh can decide better then what to do."

"Shore, we'll wait till we hear from Jim," Carter said. "C'mon—supper's 'bout ready. Let's wash up and eat."

Steve Nolan, basking in the sunshine of his sweetheart's smile, filled up and smoked. He was worn out from his long run, and in the red light of their campfires, he finally kissed Bee good night and rolled in a blanket to sleep. . . .

WHEN Steve Nolan came awake, snug in his blanket near the river bank, stars twinkled bright overhead through the high timber along the stream, and the moon was rising. The cook fires had died to dull-red beds of coals, save for one that was kept going at the upper end of the camp by a sentry. Inky shadows splotched unevenly over the ground. By necessity, to accommodate all the families which required provisions, gear and ammunition, the camp was spread for some distance down the Green River.

The hours of sleep had brought refreshed strength to Nolan's youthful body.

"Reckon I'll take a turn at guard duty," he decided, getting up.

He was thirsty and, leaving his blanket, went down to the water edge, lying on the stones to drink deeply of the cool liquid. Then he climbed the bank and passed between rows of rough shelters, moving quietly so as not to disturb the sleepers.

As Nolan, stepping lightly, approached the burning wood fire, he could see a man sitting hunched over by a good-sized tarpaulin shelter, carefully screened from possible dampness—the ammunition store of Happy Valley. The flickering flames danced on the long barrel of the sentry's rifle, lying near him on the ground.

At about the same instant, Nolan's keen eyes glimpsed a dark figure, in the black shadows near the ammunition, crouched half under the tent top. The animal ruby glow of the man's eyes in the night attracted Nolan's attention. As he stared, thinking it one of the sentries, without a sound the stealthy figure melted into the shadows behind the bulky tarpaulin.

"Who's that?" Steve called, softly, starting forward. Surely, he decided, the guard so close at hand would have heard or seen whoever it was by the ammunition stores.

Nolan went swiftly around to the fire, hunting the moving man he had glimpsed, unwilling to raise a false alarm that would frighten the women and children. Ike McNally slumped near the blaze.

"Asleep, the fool," muttered Nolan, squatting near McNally and shaking him. "Wake up, Ike," he growled.

But McNally did not respond. His head lolled on the massive shoulders with no strength in his neck. Impelled by Steve's shaking, McNally fell over limp on his side. Then Nolan could see the trickle of blood on his friend's temple. McNally had been struck over the head and was totally unconscious.

A dark, muffled figure, a mask drawn up to the glowing, feral eyes, flitted from the ammunition shelter, up behind Nolan.

Something hit Steve Nolan as he opened his mouth to cry a warning, a crushing, murderous blow from a steel bar that bashed in his Stetson like so much paper, connecting full with his skull. Without a sound Nolan crumpled on top of McNally.

The man who had struck him dropped the bar and drew a long, razor-sharp knife, raising it over

Nolan's heart. Then, with a sibilant curse, he changed his mind. Glancing around, he saw that no one stirred.

The Green River ran past, with its low-throated sound, drowning out slight noises in the night. Far down past the other end of the camp, three Valley men rode night herd on horses and bunches of cows, watching the precious animals in case the outlaws should attempt to run them off.

SQUATTED beside Nolan, the marauder seized the limp cowboy's arm and pulled Steve up, getting a shoulder under his stomach and rising. Quickly he slipped out of the light, passed the log barricade, and left the camp. In the shadows he had his horse saddled and waiting, muzzled with a strip of cloth. Throwing the senseless Nolan over the horse's back, he sprang to the leather behind the cowboy and rode up Happy Valley.

At the rendezvous, Gogettum Miller and Comanche Ed Murphy, who had a bandage plastered in his tow hair, his wide hat cocked to the other side out of the way, awaited him. He pulled down his mask.

"Yuh're late, Chief," Gogettum said. "Say, who's that yuh got with yuh?"

"That snooping young cowboy, Nolan," the man called Chief replied.

"I'll cut his heart out!" promised Gogettum.

"No—hold him. Take him up to the mine and put him to work if you want to, but don't kill him yet. I may be able to use him as a bait. That's why I didn't finish him."

"I'm all right now, and ready to get back to work, Costerman," Comanche Ed said. "There won't be no slip this time. Just say the word."

John Costerman lighted up a cigar. He blew the gray smoke from his taut lips.

"You're quite right there won't be any mistake," he declared. "I'm making sure of it. I'm destroying their ammunition, and when your gang attacks, Murphy, Happy Valley won't fire many shots. As soon as their guns are empty, they won't be able to reload. You draw them out first, and then you can charge in and wipe them out. I'm sick of delays. Besides, that Ranger's disappeared. He rode off, supposedly to check up on details—I'm not sure what. He didn't say. But he may have gone for help, and he's as dangerous a man as I ever came up with. We'll finish with these nuisances of ranchers before he comes back."

"That's talkin'!" cried Comanche Ed. "When do yuh want me to hit 'em, Costerman? I can call all my men in. Won't take but a couple days. Gogettum and me sent some of 'em to bring in more peons."

"Good. Make it Saturday night at two A.M., Murphy. By that time I'll have their ammunition ruined. If I can, I'll put Carter out of the way so they'll have no leader. Arm your fighters well, mask them, and let's not have any more mistakes. Gogettum, you furnish twenty-five helpers to Ed, so he'll have plenty and to spare. It'll be bloody but when it's finished, we'll have won. Come in the lower end of the Valley. It'll be handier. Have you got it?"

Comanche Ed repeated his instructions, and Gogettum Miller nodded.

"What I want most," the giant bandit snarled, "is a fair crack at that Ranger! I'll cut his heart out!"

"I'll get back," Costerman said. "Till Saturday night, gentlemen."

* * * * * *

STEVE NOLAN woke in the daylight. He lay on a rough stretch of rocky earth, and about him was a low hum, not the familiar sound of Green River in the canyon, but murmuring human beings.

Nolan's head was splitting and he felt weak as a kitten. He remembered, dimly, the events leading up to the moment when all had gone black. He sat up, blinking. Then he found that his ankles were bound tightly with green rawhide that cut into his flesh, shutting off the circulation. His feet were still asleep.

About him lay or squatted a large number of ragged Mexican men, peons, small, brown-faced, dark-eyed fellows familiar enough in aspect, for

Nolan had met with many of the Border folk during his life. Some lived on the Texas side of the Rio Grande, in isolated villages, as Mexican as their brothers across the line set up by governments. They were careless herders, raised little patches of grain and red peppers, and slept most of the hours away.

There were over a hundred of the Mexicans in the enclosure. It was, Nolan found as he looked about, a stockade of high tree poles bound together and hammered into the ground, open to the blue sky. The sun was not yet in sight, although its red glow was in the heavens over one side of the palisade. The light shone back from many empty bottles, and the odor he caught was that of *tequila*, the raw, murderous spirit distilled from the mescal plant.

The men in the stockade were talking in low voices, the hum he had heard as he roused. They seemed ill. He guessed they had been drinking heavily the night before and now felt the after-effects.

"Say—where in all get-out am I?" he asked of a nearby peon, who only shrugged.

Steve Nolan tried again in Spanish, and this time the Mexican replied dully:

"You work, senor? Why you here?"

"They conked me and carried me in, I reckon," Nolan told him. "Why do they hold you in this way, *bravo*?"

The peon shrugged, turned his brown hands out, so that Nolan saw the torn palms.

"The shovel and pick are not as soft as a woman's arm," the Mexican remarked.

"But why work if yuh don't like it?"

"Look, senor."

The peon pulled the rags aside, exposing his back. Livid lines told Nolan a whip had descended there not long before. He grew indignant.

"Why, it's peonage!" he growled. "It's ag'in the law."

"These men who drive us know no law except that of the whip and gun," the Mexican told him. He made a wry face. "They give us *tequila*, all we can drink. It drowns the sorrow, senor."

Come to think of it, ruminated Nolan, trying to digest this strange story, peonage wasn't uncommon, either, near the Border. Tricked into signing an "x" to a paper which he couldn't read, the Mexican would find himself bound to work from dawn to dark for a few cents. When he tried to quit, he would find that he owed the "company" for "supplies," more than he could ever earn. Nolan guessed that whoever was exploiting these unwilling laborers was charging them triple for the *tequila* which prevented them from seeking escape too avidly during the nights.

He worked at the bonds on his ankles, but with no knife they were hard to loosen. A small bit of gray granite with a sharp edge helped.

But he had hardly freed himself, and the blood was flowing back into his feet, than the stockade bar was thrown up and a man stepped inside.

CHAPTER XV

Getting Somewhere

FOR tense moments Nolan stared at the broad, bearded man who entered. He was short, but wide as a hogshead. He had a wiry black beard, a red nose and cherry Cupid lips that contrasted bizarrely with his general ugly appearance. A corduroy cap was set on his matted black hair, and he wore high-laced boots, a flannel shirt open at his hairy chest, and corduroy pants. He had lost an eye, the socket an irregular scar, drawing up one side of his cheek, but the other eye was hawklike, swift in its movement. In one paw he carried a thick-butted bullwhip.

"Get up and get to work!" he bellowed, and snapped the whip over the Mexicans.

They were quick to leap up, and they started to file out the gate.

"Why, you're the feller chased me the other day!" cried Steve Nolan, staring at him. "What's the idea, mister—tyin' me up like that?"

"So yuh've come to!"

Nolan stepped up to him, angrily.

"I'm a free citizen of Texas and yuh can't hold me here," he snapped. "Yuh're a dirty killer and—"

The whip uncoiled, wound about Nolan's head, stinging horribly. In agony, Nolan's hand flew to his holster—but it was empty. His guns had been taken from him and he was helpless.

The squat man chuckled, pulling back the relaxed whip.

"That's nothin'," he told Nolan coolly. "I can snap out yore eye from here, cowboy, and if yuh try to come at me again, I'll do it. And then I'll shoot yuh dead, savvy? Yuh ain't dealin' with anybody soft when yuh buck Gogettum Miller!"

Steve Nolan, fists clenched, contained himself. His face burned from the slash, a red welt rising in the flesh. But he knew he was helpless and decided to wait for a better chance.

"What's yore idea, Miller?" he asked. "What yuh mean to do with me?"

"That's better. Keep a humble tongue in yore head, cowboy, and we'll get along. The Chief wants yuh held, but he said to finish yuh if yuh got obstreperous, savvy? I'll put yuh to work, and yuh can sleep in here with the others. Yuh look strong."

He stepped outside, waiting there for Nolan to follow. Steve Nolan stepped out into the open, looking curiously about.

It was a camp, with tents and log shelters set in a deep, high-walled box canyon.

"Why, I know this place," he thought. "It's Wild Hoss Canyon!"

It was a couple of years since his father and he, on foot, making an exploration of the almost impassable country behind Happy Valley, had chanced upon this secret spot. A good spring came from the rocks, flowing off toward the Gulf.

The spot had changed since Nolan and his father had been here. Brush had been cut, and the dirt was stamped down. The peons, feeding from food thrown roughly in baskets on the earth, were being hurried by overseers, who carried pistols and bullwhips such as Miller possessed.

Ahead, at the far side, yawned a great black hole in the mountainside.

"What's that?" asked Steve. "A mine?"

"Yeah, it's a mine, and a deep one, Nolan. I'll show yuh round myself"—Gogettum grinned—"after breakfast. Go get yoreself somethin' to eat."

Nolan strolled over, aware that Miller watched him closely. He saw a number of men, wearing flat-topped green Stetsons, lounging up above on the wooded slope.

"Comanche Ed Murphy's outlaws," he thought. "They're hooked to this."

BOXES of stores, under sheds and tarpaulins, stood around. Some was marked BLASTING POWDER.

"Doggone," Nolan muttered, "is this where them rumblin's come from? They could be most through to the Valley walls!"

No one came up to this canyon. There was no reason to, and Nolan, like all his kind, seldom went where he could not ride a horse.

A whistle blew, and the overseers snapped their whips. Some were Mexicans of the *bravo* or gunman class, in velvet and high sombreros. Others were in mining clothes on the order of Gogettum Miller's.

"C'mon, Nolan," Miller said. "I'll show yuh what to do."

In single file the workers started for the mine entrance.

"We do most of our blastin' at night," Gogettum told Nolan, as the cowboy obediently walked toward the tunnel. "That was so you folks wouldn't notice so much."

A streak of rage flashed through Nolan. He recalled the Mexican he had seen shot down by this man, up above that day. No doubt that Mex had been some peon laborer who had managed to steal away and catch a horse upon the rim of the box canyon. And he thought of his murdered father, grew furious.

"Yuh're the skunks who killed my father!" he suddenly exploded.

Miller cursed and his single eye darkened ominously.

"Get on and keep yore mouth shut!"

he shouted angrily. "Yuh know too danged much, in my opinion. I'd use yuh up for good if I had my way, but Costerman told me to hold yuh."

"Yuh can't get away with this!" threatened Nolan. "My friends'll find me and when they do, yuh'll get what yuh deserve!"

"Keep shut!" shrieked Gogettum, and slashed him with the whip. "Yore Valley friends'll all be dead 'fore they can wink!"

Nolan was aware that he was courting death by bearding Gogettum Miller, yet the squat mine boss' veiled hint of a wholesale massacre of the Valley folk sent a streak of panic through Steve Nolan's heart. He fought for self-control, however.

"Shucks, Miller," he sneered, "we got plenty of good fightin' men and we're all ready for Comanche Ed and his gang, and you, too. We could hold off an army the way we're set."

Miller loved to talk, to boast. That was his weakness. He laughed at Steve Nolan now, so sure of his victim that he grew indiscreet.

"So yore Valley can beat us, huh? Say, Nolan, whyn't yuh come at me right now and down me?"

"Yuh'd shoot me dead, that's why."

"Right. I got bullets in my gun, bullets that shoot."

Nolan was puzzled. "Now what's he mean by that?" he thought, but aloud, he told Gogettum. "Shucks! We got bushels of ammunition and my folks're the best shots in Texas!"

Gogettum couldn't resist torturing his captive.

"We're too smart for yuh, Nolan, me'n Costerman. Yuh might as well give up hope of bein' rescued. Yore friends are as good as dead, no doubt of it. Costerman's makin' shore of 'em right now. Yuh must be slow not to savvy it, seein' as how you was captured!"

Steve Nolan chewed this over, but he was still somewhat dazed and couldn't put it together so that it matched. He stumbled on, treading through piles of grayish-white ore. He had no idea what it was, and Miller's confident threats about the Valley raised an agony of alarm in him. What would happen to pretty Bee Carter, his sweetheart, and all his friends? Would they be massacred, as the squat miner claimed? He found he was biting his lip until the blood trickled down his chin.

"I got to escape, warn 'em, somehow," he thought in fearful desperation.

Wheelbarrows stood waiting for the captives at the mine, and more tools, drilling apparatus.

"Grab a pick, Nolan," commanded Miller. "I'll soon toughen yuh up, dang yuh."

Torches were lit and, with the Mexican workers and their overseers who were armed with pistols and whips, Nolan was driven down the dusty, dry tunnel. He went on blindly and, far inside the bowels of the mountain, began to drive his pick as directed into crumbled masses brought down by blasting charges during the night. This crushed ore was loaded on barrows and trundled out.

Back aching, the rough pick handle tearing his flesh, his head still dizzy from the terrible blow he had received, and tortured by anxiety over Happy Valley's fate, Steve Nolan spent the dragging hours at hard labor, guarded by Gogettum Miller and his men, who would slay him at the slightest pretext. . . .

* * * * *

THE sorrel streaked at full speed along the chaparral trail. Jim Hatfield, low over his mount's sleek neck, crooned to Goldy, begging him to make time.

"We got to come up with that packtrain 'fore they pass the point where we picked 'em up," he muttered. "I can't lose 'em at this end."

His bold run over to the refinery island had given him valuable information that he needed. Now he meant to look over the other terminus, the mine, then sweep up the criminals he sought in his net.

"Kennet ain't nothin' but a seagoin' fool," he thought. "That Slattery's in on the game, though he's only engineer and refinery manager for that Costerman he called his chief. Seems to me as though Costerman's hooked

to Comanche Ed Murphy and his gang, and they're tryin' to scare the folks outa Happy Valley, and yet, who pulled off that ambush where I found the chunks of ore, if it wasn't Murphy?" That was a puzzle he couldn't answer.

With cold and brassy nerve, Jim Hatfield had stayed with Captain Obediah Kennet on the *Mermaid* until they had docked at Indianola, at dusk. It had been easy enough, then, for the Ranger to leave the ship, elude the angry Kennet, who, as soon as he was sure the tall man with the ready gun was out of the way, set up a cry for help.

Inquiries told him that Chihuahua Juan, the Mexican leader of the packtrain, had spent the previous night in town, had bought some provisions and, at noon the next day, perhaps eight hours before Hatfield came back to the Gulf port, had started his return trip.

Hatfield was now on the way, hoping to overtake the Mexican and his friends before they got into the thick jungle beyond his reach.

"I got to smell out this Costerman," he told himself firmly.

The noon sun beat hot upon the dusty dull green bush. Goldy, tearing on through, rippled his hide and snorted, and Hatfield, trusting his mount's keen animal instincts, pulled to a slower pace. Goldy was warning him of imminent danger.

He caught a low hail in a man's voice, up ahead. His hand dropped to his six-shooter stock. Dismounting behind the mesquite, he crept forward and looked down into the next hollow. The packtrain he had been after stood there, stopped, the drivers lolling about in the shade, rolling cigarettes as they waited.

THEY were waiting for another bunch of riders, men in flat-topped green hats which the Ranger had identified as the badge of Comanche Ed Murphy's outlaw gang. Some thirty of the latter came pushing up a trail that joined the one he was on at right angles, up from the direction of the Nueces and Rio Grande. They were escorting a large number of Mexicans, on donkeys and mules, peons from the Border.

"Now what?" Hatfield asked himself, as he watched the meeting.

The two bands joined. Hatfield recognized several of the bandits with whom he had fought on previous occasions, as they fraternized with the pack-train drivers, Chihuahua Juan and the green-hatted leader riding side by side in brotherly fashion.

"If they had any trouble," the Ranger decided, "it has been patched up, that's a cinch." He had proved a sure connection between the ore packers and the outlaws.

The Mexican peons were docile and evidently believed they were on their way to work in some normal business. The company continued on through the chaparral and Hatfield went back to Goldy and took up the pursuit.

"We're beginnin' to get somewhere now, Goldy," he informed the intelligent sorrel. "It won't be long till we can plan how to hit 'em."

CHAPTER XVI

Peonage

RIDING through the warm hours Jim Hatfield, mounted on Goldy, made turns and cut up criss-crossing trails in the maze of thorned brush.

"Must be nigh onto the Happy Valley cliffs," thought Hatfield.

They had been climbing steadily, and he paused on a height to look down at the long, serpent-like procession ahead. It was fortunate that he was so careful and that his eye was so quick, for he saw a trail guard, with a rifle, step out and salute the incoming gangs.

"Have to take care of him," he grunted.

The black tops of the mountains blocked the way ahead, looming into the sky. They were golden on one flank from the dropping sun behind the hills, rays slanting up as they were deflected by the high cliffs of Happy Valley. Hatfield sniffed. The

breeze was in his face, and the clear air was sullied by the smell of fires, of frying beef and other foods.

The Ranger followed the sign along but had to stop and leave Goldy in order to take care of the sentry he had observed. It was a slow stalk, up to a sharp bend around which the guard lurked, hidden in the bush. On his belly, Hatfield snaked to the turn and, a good-sized rock which he had picked up in one hand, and his pistol in the other, listened for him. Soon he caught slight cracklings close at hand, and a man gave a low cough.

Hatfield tossed the stone up and over so it landed in the path and rolled beyond the sentry's position, making alarming sounds.

Crouched and ready, he waited. Sure enough, the green-hatted member of Comanche Ed's gang stuck out his head and shoulders, rifle up, looking to see what had caused the noise. Naturally he first glanced the way the rock had landed and Hatfield seized the precious instant he had made for his attack. Leaping in, his Colt barrel descended with unerring skill on the skull.

"What the—" the outlaw gasped, his widened eyes fixed on the Ranger just as Hatfield hit. But they were glazing.

His knees buckled, and he went down under the heavy officer, whose knee drove into the belly, completing the knockout. Quickly Hatfield bound and gagged him and rolled him into the chaparral.

Hurrying on, he was in time to see the pack-train as it entered the bushy entrance of a steep-sided box canyon. At one side stood a man on foot, with a Winchester in his hand.

"'Nother guard," the eagle-eyed Hatfield muttered. "Wonder can I work around to the side?"

The smoke came from the canyon, and night was close at hand. With his curiosity fanned to the limit, the Ranger hid Goldy and sought a way up to the wing of the cut. On the lower flank, out of sight of the sentry at the entrance, he hunted a path, but the country was as wild as any he had ever been in, choked with masses of great rocks and trees. Thorned brush was so dense it would take a machete to hack through it.

He drew in and, tantalizingly, could hear the dim hum of many voices, but was unable to reach the rim where he might peek over.

"Night's at hand," he muttered. "I'd like to get a look-see at the lay of this camp!"

His quick eyes, hunting around, noted a tall spruce tree not far from his position. It towered into the sky and its top branches were higher than the gray, steep-faced bluff blocking him. He took off his boots and belt, stuck a gun in his pants belt, and started up.

WHEN he reached a vantage point in the tree, he was startled at the large number of men below, lounging or squatting around the smoky cook-fires.

"Why, there must be nigh onto three hundred in there!" he decided.

Green-hatted outlaws made up about a third of the number. He identified the giant form of Comanche Ed Murphy, and when the bandit chieftain got up and walked over to take a third helping of supper, the Ranger knew that Murphy had recovered from his fall in the Valley that night of the attack.

Hatfield was able to recognize others of the outlaws he had fought, and observed the lean Mexican who had been in charge of the ore-train which he had followed to the Gulf. His swift eyes ran over the gathering, taking in the camp. Many of the men wore miner's clothing, high boots, corduroys, peaked caps. He noted the stockade, its gate open now, the shacks and tents and, at the upper end of the box canyon, the black adit of the mine.

He looked again at the large bunch of Mexican peons, which the newcomers had joined. They were eating scraps of supper, and huddled together as though for protection. Half of the men in the box canyon were the Ranger's enemies, the other half Mexicans he soon guessed must be virtual prisoners, for a squat man with a dark beard strolled over and cracked

a bullwhip over them. The peons jumped up and started for the stockade, and Hatfield watched with keen interest as they were hustled into the prison, evidently for the night.

"Peonage!" he muttered.

He had run into this before. It was a favorite device to obtain cheap labor, at hard, unpleasant work such as mining. Overseers stood at either side of the stockade entry, passing bottles to the laborers.

"Likker to deaden 'em," Hatfield thought.

Then his lips clicked in amazement, for he saw a man he knew in the gang of Mexicans. That man had been lying exhausted on his side, his back to the Ranger's position and hidden by several Mexicans sitting up as they ate. Now, under the impetus of the broad, squat miner's lash, he got to his feet and staggered to the stockade.

"Steve Nolan!" Jim Hatfield muttered.

Cold rage was in his heart. They had captured Nolan! He didn't know how, but he meant to find out. And alarm was in his brain, too, alarm for the fate of Happy Valley. If they had taken Nolan, what did it mean? Had they also attacked the Valley while the Ranger was making the run to the Gulf? Or did this explain why Nolan had failed to come home?

His keen gaze took in the big bands of horses and mules penned in the canyon, mounts for the bands of murderous men, then he descended the tree, body sliding on the rough trunk. The black curtain of night fell over the land, plunging him into darkness. He sought to orient himself, so he might get back to the trail, but had almost to feel a way in the rough underfooting.

Soon a red flare attracted him, shining through the interstices of bush. It was a torch, stuck in the ground at the entry to the box canyon. By its guidance he was able to creep closer and closer.

Fortunately he was able to draw within thirty feet of the sentry without stepping out past the jut of the bluff on his side. The man, whose rifle was leaning against a rock wall, rose, stretched, and yawned.

Hatfield could hear the buzz of voices inside. Horses whinnied, mules brayed. He waited, crouched in the dense shadow beneath the overhang. The ruby light of the torch cast flickering tongues for a small area about the entrance.

"I got to take Nolan outa that," he thought.

But with such a mob of fighting men inside, he could never hope to accomplish it single-handed. Many might turn in, but there would always be some awake, and with the sentry at the gate, a slight alarm would fetch the whole ravening crew upon him without doing Nolan any good.

HE held himself in, waiting for his chance. The stamping of hundreds of hoofs puzzled him. He heard men shouting and cursing, as though at horses, the character of the voices changing. Then the guard, bored by his task of sitting or standing by the

canyon gate, began what Hatfield had counted on, a stroll up and down his beat, rifle held in the crook of his arm. He walked up to the other end, turned, and passed the entrance, slowly drawing nearer and nearer the hidden Ranger.

Hardly breathing, pushed back against the rock behind a jut, the tall officer knew he must strike with unerring precision. Slight sounds, the scuffle of feet, a gasp or grunt, might pass unnoticed in the canyon camp, but a shot would prove fatal.

The guard wore the flat-topped green hat of Comanche Ed Murphy's followers. He was tall, heavy of body, and his leather creaked as he moved. His face was dirty, with untidy beard stubble on the chin and cheeks. Hatfield caught the glow of his fierce eyes as, smoking a cigarette, he stretched his long legs.

Then he was a yard past the lurking

Ranger and Hatfield's powerful legs launched him in a tigerish lunge that ended as his gun barrel struck while with his other hand he tore the rifle from the bandit.

"Ugh!" gasped the attacked man. He was turning as Hatfield, having disposed of the rifle, which fell to earth, hit him in the belly, doubling him up. The outlaw's arm flew up as he instinctively tried to defend himself, but his wind was knocked out and he caught his breath, to scream the alarm.

But the Ranger's rush had not checked. His lithe body struck with all his weight and skill, overpowering the outlaw, driving him to the grass. Sinewy fingers found the throat, pressing the cartilage in. The pain-racked man could only gurgle, as he writhed. Mercilessly, Jim Hatfield choked him until he ceased to fight, and his head lolled loose on his shoulders.

Panting from the terrific exertion, the officer caught the sound of a great voice, bellowing orders. It was a voice he knew, that of Comanche Ed Murphy.

"Line up, and mount, boys! Make shore yuh got plenty of ammunition. We're ridin'!"

"They're comin' out," the Ranger thought.

He must act swiftly, for they would notice the disappearance of the gate guard. He crammed the outlaw's bandanna into the lax mouth and, picking up the heavy man, threw him back under the bluff. Seizing the fellow's green-crowned Stetson, which had come off in the melee, he tossed his own hat into the shadow and donned the outlaw's, picked up the Winchester and hurried to a spot not far from the canyon gate.

"It's got to work," he muttered, setting himself carefully.

Hardly had he squatted down, body angled away from the gate, on the other flank from the burning torch stuck in the ground, than the van of gunmen trotted from the box canyon.

Death was upon him, certain death under a hundred guns if he were recognized, for he could never elude them here. There were too many of them, and while Goldy would come to his whistle, they could ride him down and tear him to pieces long before the sorrel could run in.

Steel nerves under stern control, he hunched down, his face shaded by the green hat. He held the rifle out in front so it reflected the gleam of the brand. Eyes glancing sideward would catch that glint, be held by it, and would not be so likely to peer closely at the sentry, whose presence they would take for granted.

THE Ranger was as far as he dared be from the exit. Comanche Ed Murphy, on a big gray horse—he had lost his black in the Valley duel with Hatfield—rode through, trailed by lieutenants.

"S'long, Willy," sang out Murphy, glancing in Hatfield's direction and carelessly waving a gauntleted hand. "Bet yuh wish yuh was goin' along. When we get through with that Valley there won't be a cowman left in it! I'll get yuh some revenge for that crease yuh took the other night."

Hatfield waved back but did not speak. Comanche Ed rode on by, and more and more fierce, heavily-armed killers came through the narrow gate. From under his long lashes, and the green brim of the Stetson, he made rough count on them, noted the scattering of miners, in different rig, evidently an auxiliary fighting force.

"Over a hundred," he muttered, as the rear guard of the terrible crew swung in after their chiefs and pounded swiftly away into the night, taking the out-trail. "And headed for Happy Valley! At least they ain't cleaned 'em out yet! And Carter should put up a good fight if they stick together in their camp like I told 'em."

When they were gone, on their way, he hurriedly secured the trail sentry, who was moaning a bit but still too weak to move. Keeping on the green hat, and with the bandit's belt of rifle ammunition thrown over one shoulder, Jim Hatfield boldly entered the gate of the box canyon and strode toward the enemy camp.

CHAPTER XVII

Hide-and-Seek in the Dark

BESIDE the fires, which were dying, save for one, squatted a dozen men. Jim Hatfield's quick eye checked on the blanketed, sleeping figures on the hillside, no doubt drivers of the packtrain resting after their arduous run to the Gulf.

The wide-bodied, squat miner who had wielded the bullwhip over the peons after their evening meal, looked up as Hatfield approached. The Ranger realized now that he was one-eyed, and that he was blinded by the fire.

"That you, Willy?" the squat man growled. "Tough yuh couldn't go 'long with Murph and get some of yore own back on them Valley skunks."

Hatfield waved, silently, veering toward a water barrel standing under a tree. He had a drink, and heard one of the men by the fire ask:

"Say, Gogettum, yuh goin' to work them peons tomorrer?"

"Reckon so," the squat man replied, his attention drawn off the shadowy figure at the water supply. "Why not?"

"'Cause, there's shore a big gang of 'em and they're honin' to kill us, if they get a chance."

"Shucks," Gogettum said contemptuously, "we got guns, and they ain't. We could mow 'em down if they start anything."

"I agree with Durgan," growled another miner. "Miller, them Mexes are druv to the point of desperation. They might overrun us if they rushed all to once. I vote we leave 'em locked up till the boys get back."

"Aw," Gogettum Miller began, then stopped. "All right—mebbe we will," he agreed. "A rest won't do none of us any harm, at that."

While they were talking, Hatfield, instead of returning to the gate, slipped around the far side of the tree under which the water barrel stood. Stepping silently, he drew off in the darkness behind some stunted bushes at the edge of the box canyon. He looked back. Gogettum Miller, evidently boss of the camp, and his mates were still in their ring, heads together.

"Costerman—Costerman," Hatfield murmured. "Wonder where he is? Could he be up here?"

The peon stockade was on the other wing of the canyon, and to reach it he would have to walk across an open space lighted by the fire. He kept going, instead, seizing bits of cover which hid him from Gogettum and his men, and flitted farther from the fire. The moon was not yet high, and stars twinkled in the sky section visible directly over the deep canyon. He was nearly at the end where the mine was, and the black mouth invited him.

"Reckon I better wait till they're asleep 'fore tryin' to contact Nolan," he decided, and stepped in.

Striking a match, after feeling a way for some distance, he found he was in a great tunnel, with uneven, grayish-white walls looming about him.

He used up several matches before he came upon a candle stub, stuck in a niche, and lighted it. Keenly interested in mining, he observed the acid-eruptive rocks.

"Quartz gangue," he said. "That's typical."

The shaft was driven deep in the mountain, slanting down gradually, with a smooth track for trundling out barrows of ore. The air was warm and stale but breathable. In the working chambers, he gave expert attention to the great rock masses shot with valuable veins.

Setting the candle firmly on a flat bit of rock, he squatted to examine a particularly thick deposit.

AN instant later, the *cluck-cluck* of a cocking gun behind him told him he was covered, from the rear. Unable to see his enemy, unless he first whirled, Hatfield was forced to obey the rough voice that roared, echoing in the vaulted pit:

"Reach, or I'll cut yuh in two!"

In the little circle of light cast by the candle stub, burned down to an inch of tallow, the Ranger cursed him-

self for his carelessness in permitting his interest in the mine to betray him. His hands rose over his head. Then the heavy voice ordered:

"Turn round, slow-like. Pull off that hat, but don't get yore hand below yore shoulder!"

Carefully Hatfield pivoted and stared into the gloom, removing the outlaw hat and throwing it down.

There stood Gogettum Miller. The Ranger could make out the squat, broad mine boss, a double-barreled shotgun, sawed off for close killing, in his gnarled hands. Visible between his cherublike lips were his stained teeth, gritted. The tip of his cherry-red nose twitched, and his black beard began to bristle with rising fury, his bright lone eye round with amazement.

"You! You!" he shouted. "I'll be dogged! That green Stetson fooled me!"

"So yuh savvy who I am?" inquired Hatfield, in a gentle, quiet voice.

"Durn right," gasped the excited killer. "Murph and Coster—I mean, the Chief—done told me what yuh looked like, 'case yuh ever crossed my path. They said yuh was nervy, but I never believed yuh'd have the iron crust to walk right in here!"

Desperate as his position was, Hatfield was straining his senses in an effort to stave off the last even moment when Gogettum would kill.

"He's already made one error," he thought. "Talkin', 'stead of cuttin' me in half when my back was turned."

Aloud he said in the same even, soft way: "I wouldn't have if I'd known *you* was on duty, Gogettum. Thought I had yuh fooled."

"Huh!" crowed Gogettum, but he never varied the shotgun's level aim on Hatfield's chest and face. "Yuh gotta get up danged early and stay awake late to beat Gogettum Miller, Ranger! I seen yuh over at that water barrel. 'Willy's mighty dry tonight,' I thinks, for he'd just been in and filled up a little while before. Even so, I didn't git leery, till I watched the gate and Willy didn't go out. Got curious, and went to hunt him, 'cause he wasn't on his post. I ain't the sort to let sich a mystery slide."

The man's single eye never left his captive, under the menacing, murderous shotgun barrels. Buckshot-loaded, it would tear holes as big as dinner plates in a man's body at such range. Hatfield kept his hands elevated. Gogettum, knowing the mine by heart, had crept up in the darkness, except for the illumination from the candle Hatfield had left on the rock. From the corner of a gray-green eye, Hatfield could see the little yellow flame.

"Lucky he enjoys chewin' the fat," he was thinking. "Mebbe—Well, I'll try."

"Yeah, I'm a Texas Ranger,—Jim Hatfield's the name," he admitted. "First time I was ever took like *this*, Miller. Why, I got a reputation to uphold!"

Gogettum chuckled. His range of sight was limited, but he needed only his one eye to pin the prisoner under the shotgun. [*Turn page*]

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"Yuh needn't feel ashamed when yuh get to the Pearly Gates or wherever and they ask yuh who sent yuh, Hatfield. I've heard tell of yuh. Fact is, yuh shot a cousin of mine to death in a battle across the Pecos last year. Remember him?"

"Who was that?"

"Stubby Miller. Worked for the Hosshead Kid's gang."

"Shore, shore, I remember him well. He put up a good fight 'fore he died, Gogettum. It's a small world, ain't it?"

"Shore is. Wait'll Comanche and Costerman see who I trapped! I come over to the mine, after yuh, didn't savvy who it was, but I sneaked in and now I got yuh."

DELICATE as a finely tuned instrument, Hatfield detected the threat creeping into Gogettum Miller's coarse voice. He knew that the mine chief meant to kill him, but he asked:

"What yuh goin' to do with me, now yuh got me? My arms are gettin' tired."

"I'll soon relieve yuh of that, Ranger."

Gogettum had already made his mistake, in talking at all. While his eye had been riveted on Hatfield, the candle had burned down to its last gasp, and began to gutter on the rock. The change of the light startled Miller, alert as he was.

"The light's goin' out, Gogettum," the Ranger remarked sharply.

He ducked as he spoke, counting on the involuntary twitch of the man's glance at the candle. No one but a person trained to dangerous situations could have timed the play with such genius. It was a question of seizing the breath of an instant. But that was all Jim Hatfield's swift, reflex-actioned muscles directed by the icy brain, needed.

"Cut it out!" shrieked Gogettum Miller.

The heavy shotgun bellowed, its report reverberating with stunning force in the mine chamber, belching a dense smoke, and the echoes of the sound tearing up the narrowing tunnel. The bunched buckshot had no space in which to spread. It was too close for that. The whole load *whooshed* inches over Hatfield's lowered, bare, black-haired head and struck the quartz wall, shattering in a rain of granite particles and bits of lead as it was suddenly checked.

At that instant, from the explosion-disturbed air in the confined space and its shaky condition, the candle flicked out.

It was a moment when the slightest slip meant death. Jim Hatfield, having bet his life that he could distract the talkative Gogettum Miller for that precious click of eternity, had made his draw, a lightning flick of his slim, trained hand that jumped the blue-steel Colt to his grip. His long thumb cocked the hammer spur as he plucked the weapon from its oiled leather sheath, supple and willing to allow the snap without binding. His thumb rose, and the hammer fell, the firing-pin hitting the rim, exploding cap and charge, and driving the .45-caliber bullet from the cartridge.

Gogettum uttered a sharp curse, but he did not hit the floor. Instead, he pulled the second trigger of the sawed-off shotgun, aiming at the flare of Hatfield's Colt. However, the Ranger had shoved aside as he let go, and again the wadded buckshot charge tore within inches of his vitals.

He knew he had hit Miller, but how badly he could not guess in the dense blackness. Not a bit of light penetrated here from outside and the blue-red flares of the guns only further accentuated the general darkness.

"Aw, yuh—yuh hit me, Miller," he groaned, though he took care not to stay in the same spot.

He drew a quick reply as Miller flung away the empty shotgun, end over end through the inky hot air. The butt struck Hatfield in the side of the head, making him see stars and his ears ring furiously.

Pulling himself together, he cautiously felt a way with his left hand, Colt in his right, seeking to move without sound around to Gogettum's flank.

Absolute quiet was upon them, as they groped in the blackness for one

another. Pausing to listen, flat on the rock, Hatfield stopped breathing so he might hear better for a moment. He caught the sound of heavy, gasping grunts.

"He moved a bit, jest 'fore I fired after the candle quit," he thought.

A piece of stone slid, noisily by contrast, down the slope, dislodged by Gogettum Miller's boot. Hatfield was aware that his antagonist, too, was hunting in the dark.

CHAPTER XVIII

The Fight in the Mine

MOMENTS of tense waiting, those were, with death within a few feet, an invisible death in the hand of a cunning, capable adversary. They were moments to torture a man's soul. At any instant a gun might explode and the bullet tear to a vital spot.

They seemed to drag out, much too long for the little spaces of time clicked off. His body and nervous system in a steel grip, Hatfield lurked in the gloom, straining for the advantage before he gave himself away to Miller, who was concentrated on the same task. The seconds were endless. Gogettum was crawling, but the slight brushing sounds his clothing made on the rock were distorted by echoes in the hollow cavern.

"I'm goin' to chance it," Hatfield thought. "If I don't his men'll be up—"

Even as he came to this decision, to fire in the general direction of his opponent, Gogettum's nerve snapped. The mine chief's Colt roared and spat flame, and in that snapshot of flaring powder, Jim Hatfield photographed his enemy, down on one side, his cherub mouth open like that of a gasping fish.

"Hey, Gogettum—are yuh in there? What's wrong? Who's shootin'?"

"This way, boys—h u s t l e, yuh fools!" shrieked Miller despairingly. "I'm—done—"

"Yuh shore are," Hatfield muttered.

His six-shooter's cracking drowned out Gogettum's yell to his men. Printed indelibly on his brain was the stretched-out body of the man, over against the other wall, with his pistol up, supporting his arm on the elbow, his single eye gleaming with agony.

The Ranger fired, once, and then again, spacing them so he could not fail to hit a vital spot. The two explosions, joined together, ran up the tunnel, banged in his ears. Gogettum Miller did not speak any more, and the flashes of the Ranger gun did not draw replies.

"Hey, Gogettum, we're a-comin'!"

Miller's men were starting down into the mine, cutting Hatfield off from escape. Hatfield straightened up, leaped over.

"Miller!" he snarled, gun up.

No answer. His hand touched the squat man's bearded face, but Miller did not twitch. He was still warm. Hatfield struck a match, his rugged face lengthened in grim ferocity of the kill.

Gogettum was finished. A bullet had hit him in the upper lip, over his red mouth, and penetrated his brain. Another had drilled his chest. As Hatfield's match burned his thumb and forefinger, he saw a third hole in the mine chief's gray flannel shirt, on the left side.

"Reckon I nipped him the first time," he thought. "The last two got him right."

The original wound, from the Ranger Colt as the candle went out, had hampered Miller's escape and movements.

Outside of slight cuts and a bruise where the shotgun butt had hit him, the tall officer was not injured. He shoved fresh shells into his pistol and, keeping it in his hand, started to run out. He had to reach the exit before the skeleton crew left at the camp could concentrate on him. Though he had deprived them of their chief, Gogettum Miller, there were still a couple of dozen gunmen around.

"Only chance is, the ones asleep 'll be slow gettin' started," he muttered.

"Gogettum—Gogettum!" called a rough voice anxiously.

IN the inky dark, Hatfield struck against the narrowing tunnel wall, jolting himself. He tried to disguise his voice, dropping to the mine chief's guttural growl.

"C'mon, boys—I got him!" he sang out. "But hustle!"

Would his ruse fool them? He saw the bobbing torch glow coming toward him, and crouched by a quartz outcrop, gun in hand. Straining his eyes, he made out four bulky figures, some of the men who had been lounging around that fire with Miller when the Ranger had entered the camp.

A dark-faced miner carried a torch, leading the way. They had heard his call and had been deceived, as he had hoped, by the distortion usual in such a confined space, and believed Miller had replied to them. So they were hurrying along to join their boss.

They were armed, one with a shotgun, the same kind of sawed-off scattergun as the dead Gogettum had carried. Knowing them to be killers and thieves, ready for any sort of crime, Hatfield showed scant mercy. He raised his Colt and fired, taking care to leave the man with the light unharmed, for the burning torch framed his targets.

The explosion echoed and banged in the mine. The fellow with the shotgun threw up both hands, with a screech, and rolled against the rock wall. For a second his three companions, pulling up short, stared at him.

"Don't shoot, Gogettum," screamed the one with the light. "It's us!"

"Somethin's sour," Hatfield heard a green-hatted outlaw growl, as the gunman threw up a Colt. "Miller wouldn't shoot us."

When the bandit fired, the whining lead passed Hatfield and hit the wall, ricocheted with a shriek and stopped in the quartz gangue yards beyond his position. A breath later, and the green-hat joined the dead miner on the tunnel floor. The third was another of Miller's toughs. He had glimpsed the flash of the Ranger gun, and had started shooting at it, but the fellow with the torch, a Mexican-American overseer, lost his nerve, turned and ran back, calling for help at the top of his voice.

Hatfield's hot bullets blasted through the straightaway as he picked up his feet and started running, following the light, which made a sure guide. His heavy pistols ploughed the way clear for him. The third gunman was writhing on the stone, badly wounded by the stream of lead, as the big officer flashed by.

He shoved new shells into his cylinders, allowing the torch-carrier to stay up until he saw the patch of lighter night sky ahead.

"Help, help!" the half-breed cried. "There's a slaughter in the mine! Gogettum's dead! C'mon, hustle, boys! Somethin's gone wrong!"

He suddenly stopped short, in the entrance, his head snapping back, the torch flying from his hand and going out as it hit. Flexing back, teeth biting his tongue in death agony, the fourth outlaw crashed, a victim of the Ranger's fighting ability and strategy.

Hatfield paused, in the black hole, squatted down to peek out. After the inky mine, the outside seemed light, the stars beacons, the glowing fire casting a bloody glow. He could see many men now, all of the skeleton force left to watch the camp, as they came running toward the mine, in full alarm following the heavy gunfire and shouting.

"Lucky for me Gogettum was only suspicious and not shore," muttered the Ranger.

That was his chance, which he had taken, and made good. He had cleared a path with his swift, deadly Colts, and, leaping the prostrate body in the entry, jumped off to the right, away from the approaching killers. Many had been asleep when the hubbub had started, and had lost time in rolling from their blankets, picking up guns, ascertaining where the trouble lay. But now they were coming, a tall, lean Mexican leading them —the same one who had been in charge of the ore train Hatfield had followed to the coast.

"Zere he goes!"

The keen black eyes of Chihuahua Juan glimpsed the flitting figure, the

whiter patch of the Ranger's face against the dark bulge of the hill. He pulled his shotgun triggers.

Guns hunted Hatfield as, low down, he dashed for a high pile of crushed ore. A pellet snapped at his back, stinging frightfully as it cut his flesh. He felt the warm blood spurt from the slashed back. One of Chihuahua's scattering buckshot had creased him, but he made the shelter of the ore pile and now their lead kicked up pieces of stone or thudded into dirt.

"Spread out—spread out! Both sides! He's zere, behin' ze ore!"

They split, half taking the right, the rest the other flank, driving in on the Ranger. Hatfield, breath rasping in his powerful lungs, unfamiliar with the details of the ground, quickly hunted escape. There were too many of them for one to handle, and he did not fancy a long siege. He had work to do, and Happy Valley was in peril.

"Have to make it," he muttered, and ran back from the hill of ore, keeping it between him and his enemies. For a time it hid him, but then Chihuahua sighted him, and shouted commands that veered his gang on Hatfield's zigzagging trail.

Brush, trees and rocks helped him as he ducked from cover to cover, hearing the deadly bullets close about him. Shrill whistles came from the Ranger's lips, as he moved, turning to shake their aim with his accurate fire. He downed two of them and they slowed, not so willing to come up on him without plenty of assistance.

He paused behind a great boulder, fought back. Chihuahua Juan cut chunks of stone from the rock, that rained on his head. He repeated his whistling and, glancing toward the gate to the canyon, lighted by the fires, saw a golden shape come galloping in, tail up and mane flying.

"Good old Goldy," he muttered. "He was waitin' and ready!"

A terrific double blast from the Ranger Colts sent the killers down, hunting shelter. Then he dashed out, keeping low, and as Goldy veered toward him, he hit leather and streaked across the canyon.

All of the fighting men were behind him, chasing him in the night. Their chief, Gogettum Miller, was dead, downed by Ranger lead.

The fast sorrel gave a bounding leap, feeling the burn of a bullet on his handsome flank, but he kept going and carried his rider to the opposite side. Hatfield guided with his iron-grip knees, and then they were out of danger for a minute, close to the stockade.

Throwing himself to the ground, Hatfield crept to the front, and jumped to the gate. His Colt roared, as he placed the muzzle against the padlock, blowing it off the hasp. Opening the gate, Hatfield jumped in, while bullets from his foes hit the palisades.

"Nolan!" he cried. "Nolan! Where are yuh?"

THE black shadow of the palings cut off the light from the canyon fires. Shrieks of hate, and exploding pistols were approaching, as Chihuahua Juan and his men, some twenty perhaps, charged over to slaughter the Ranger. Inside, the peons were muttering in excitement and fear, yet there was a note of hope rising from their despair. There was a big fight going on, and they began to think it might mean rescue.

Little men, who had been awakened before from half-drunken stupor by the battle, were on their feet, crowding toward the unlocked gate. Steve Nolan's voice reached Hatfield.

"Jim—is it you? Gawd, I'm glad to see yuh!"

Nolan was almost sobbing with relief as he fought a way to Hatfield's side, through the throngs of ragged Mexicans.

"No time to talk—there's twenty of 'em comin'!" Hatfield said quickly. "Here, take this gun, and a handful of bullets."

"Gogettum Miller—"

"He's dead. Hustle—we can't stay in here."

He turned, crouched at the gate, peering out. Chihuahua Juan and his gang were coming, blasting the stockade. Hatfield looked over his shoulder, as the Mexicans in the rear, crowding against their friends up

front, began shoving harder.

"Stand back," he ordered in liquid Spanish. "You are saved, *hombres.*"

Nolan had the spare pistol and the bullets, was pulling himself together for the fight. He sought to shoulder a way back to Hatfield, separated in the seething mob. A broad, short Mexican with a black mustache that spread inches beyond his cheeks, sputtered in furious dialect to his friends. They were filled with *tequila,* but most had not yet had enough to stupefy them.

"Back, yuh fools!" roared Hatfield. "They're comin'!"

If they heard him, they paid no heed. Pent-up despair turned to raging fury in their hearts. They were not *bravos,* they were not fighting men, but any human being will turn when goaded far enough. A terrible muttering that grew to a roar of hate drowned out Hatfield's voice, as the Mexicans surged from the stockade, knocking him aside with the sheer weight of their numbers. There were nearly two hundred miserable men in there, men who had been tortured and worked as slaves, kept from their homes and families by the greed of the miner bosses.

"The time has come!" shrieked the peon ringleader. He was outside, picking up a short-handled shovel from the pile left near the stockade for the night.

Others quickly followed his example. They seized picks and crowbars, shovels and rocks, anything that came to hand. The Mexicans streamed from the stockade, forming into a fast-moving mob that flowed like a tidal wave across the box canyon.

Nolan, knocked out of the crush as Hatfield had been, shielding his face and chest with his arms as he was kicked and trampled by fury-blinded Mexicans, finally fought his way to his feet as the rear guard thinned out. He staggered to Hatfield who, seeing the way it was going, knew he could not stop the rush, for the Mexicans were deaf, blind, to everything but revenge.

"C'mon—we'll help," ordered the Ranger, following them out.

Chihuahua Juan and his men, outnumbered eight to one, had pulled up short as they saw the prisoners streaming from the stockade. They fired their guns, and several of the Mexicans were hit, some falling, but the rush did not stop. Frozen for a moment, the outlaws stared with unbelieving eyes at the worms who had turned.

CHAPTER XIX

Canyon Massacre

KNOWING he could not stop the maddened Mexicans, Jim Hatfield, trailed by the staggering, bruised Steve Nolan, began shooting into the line of green-hatted outlaws and miners, the skeleton force guarding the camp. Had the vast array of fighting bandits and miners been there, the Mexicans would have died in a mass slaughter, but the Ranger Colts had carved down the odds, and now abetted in the final smashup.

He fired over the lowered heads of the Mexicans. Chihuahua Juan, who was trying to shove fresh shells into his sawed-off shotgun, the best weapon with which to handle a mob, withered and staggered, went down on one knee.

His score of men felt the Ranger lead, the bite of Steve Nolan's vengeful gun. But their fascinated gaze was riveted on what was coming at them, the fierce, dark faces of the aroused peons whose rage transcended any fear.

Suddenly one bandit, getting control of his legs, turned and ran for the horses and mules penned on the opposite side of the box canyon. Then the whole line broke and the green-topped killers, with their miner companions, took to their heels, only shooting back as they dashed to get mounts and escape.

Hatfield and Nolan hurried after the mass of Mexicans, shouting to them to calm down, but it was like addressing a tidal wave and begging it to check its mad rush.

They reached the spot where Chihuahua Juan, wounded and stunned by Hatfield's bullet, had been kneeling. A few shreds of velvet lay on the ground, some metal conchas that had been hat-trimmings. He had been hacked and torn to pieces by the Mexicans in the short space of time before Hatfield could reach him.

The Mexicans, waving shovels and picks, crossed the canyon, and caught the panic-stricken foe one by one as each sought to get a horse and flee. Blood-curdling shrieks, triumphant howls, rose over the canyon.

The tall officer, trailed by the limping Nolan, reached the scene where peons were milling about, swearing and crying in high-pitched voices. Several of the bandits lay, twisted, and with heads bashed in, with Mexicans still pounding at them with picks and crowbars. Of others there were only pieces left. Not one had managed to escape.

"Calm down, calm down, *hombres!*" shouted Hatfield in their native tongue.

It was all over. The sloe-eyed little Mexicans paused, returning to themselves after the burning thirst for revenge was sated. They had dazed looks on their dark-skinned faces, and a number of them began to sob, tears rolling down their cheeks. The leader, with the wide handlebar mustachios, blinked as he looked up into the tall Ranger's grim eyes. He was bleeding in a dozen places.

"Senor," he gasped, "we could not help it. They—they are beasts."

"They *were*, yuh mean, *bravo*," Hatfield replied drily.

Hatfield had lost the green Stetson he had taken in the mine, and his own hat lay outside by the trussed gate guard. His black hair was awry, sweaty from his exertions, and he was bloody from his injuries. Still in Spanish, he said to the Mexican ringleader:

"*Bravo*, keep your men here and when the rest of the gang returns, we'll arrest them."

But that was not their way. Panic began to show in dark eyes which had burned with fanatical mob fury. Individuals were already stealing away, seizing mules or horses for quick escape, to return home. Others were hurrying toward the food supplies, and snatching up delicacies, which they ravenously crammed into their mouths.

"SENOR," the Mexican leader said, "we are not *bravos*, you know that, or we would not be here in the first place. No, I must ride home quickly to my Conchita and my little ones, who must be dying with fear for me by this time."

"You did pretty well for amateurs," Hatfield drawled.

He did not make any further attempt to hold the Mexicans. They were not fighting men. They had been roused to mob fury by oppression and torture, and now they were ready to go home. They were filling their pockets with food, saddling mules and horses for the trip to the Border country where they lived.

"Jim, I'm starved myself," Nolan remarked. "And I'm worried sick 'bout my people."

Hatfield was hungry, too.

"C'mon, let's have a bite," he suggested, and the two young men strode to the food shed.

Tin cans filled with beef, vegetables and other delicacies lay scattered about by the famished Mexicans. Some had been cut open with knives or banged on rocks to get at the contents. Nolan picked one marked PORK AND BEANS, and Hatfield silently handed him a knife.

"These danged tins are all the rage now," remarked Nolan, cramming food into his mouth.

"Yeah, yuh're right. It's a great thing to have such food, winter or summer, in the desert or anywheres at all, Steve."

Nolan was worried about his friends.

"I got to ride back to the Valley fast as I can, Jim. They're in danger. Gogettum Miller boasted to me they was as good as finished."

"Yeah? Why?"

Nolan shrugged, chewing as he spoke.

"Miller mentioned somebuddy

named 'Costerman.' Seemed like he was Gogettum's pard or mebbe his boss. I dunno just what Miller was drivin' at, but he seemed all-fired shore the Valley men couldn't stop Comanche Ed's gang."

"How so? The Valley folks are well armed, and all together."

"Yeah, but when I told him that, and said we had plenty ammunition, Miller sneered. Said Costerman and him were too smart for us, that Costerman was makin' shore of 'em right then, their ammunition included!"

Hatfield, biting at a tasty chunk of canned beef—it was much better than a stringy, tough dried strip salted long before—turned this over in his quick mind.

"Costerman's makin' shore of 'em," he repeated. "How could he do that, unless . . . What'd Gogettum say 'bout their ammunition?"

His keen suspicion kept him busy, thinking it over. He listened to Steve Nolan's swift tale of how he had been knocked over the head and captured.

"Ike McNally was conked, 'fore me," explained Nolan. "Then I see this dark figger by the ammunition stores, and when I went over, thinkin' McNally just asleep, I was hit."

"Yuh saw this feller by the ammunition?"

"Yeah."

Quick light came to the Ranger.

"S'pose," he deduced, "there was a traitor in yore Valley camp, Steve. If he tampered with yore ammunition, that'd make Gogettum's boast true. Yore friends wouldn't have a chance of holdin' off Comanche Ed."

Steve Nolan choked on his food, leaping up, eyes blazing.

"Yuh've hit it on the head, Jim! That devil who conked me was right by the store of bullets, no doubt duddin' 'em. He had to knock out McNally to do it, and then me, when I come along!"

NOLAN started for the horse corral. Bunches of the Mexicans were riding out of the box canyon, hurrying to put distance between themselves and their erstwhile prison before daylight. They feared the return of Murphy's outlaw band.

"Wait, Steve!" called Hatfield. "Where yuh goin'?"

"Home, of course, fast as I can drive."

"How long a run is it from here to the Valley?"

"Oh, several hours round through the chaparral trails. But I savvy a shortcut up over the cliffs, Jim, that'll take me there quick."

"A hoss can make it?"

"Yuh can't ride one all the way, but yuh can pull him up the steep places. I figger Dad was kilt up above here."

"Huh! If he got too close to this mine, they'd drill him. Yeah, Steve, and then they hid his body to cover the murder, blasted the cliffs. Killed two birds with one stone—hid the corpse and scared the Valley folks 'bout the cliffs!"

The squat Pablo, the ringleader with the gigantic mustache, rode a mule up, saluting Hatfield. He was deeply grateful to the tall American who had freed him.

"Senor," he said in liquid Spanish, *"gracias, mil gracias.* Come ride with us. We must go now."

"No, Pablo, I'll stay. But you and yore *amigos* can clean up the mess yuh made, if yuh want to repay me."

Pablo sang out to his remaining friends, and many began work, quickly cleaning up the remains of their victims and tossing them into the brush and rocks for the buzzards.

"Adios, senor grande," Pablo sang out. They rode away, leaving the two young Texans in camp.

"Steve, go pick yoreself a good hoss and the two best mules in that corral. Strap some of them big leather *aparejos* on the mules. See 'em hangin' on the fence? Bring 'em over here."

Hatfield mounted Goldy, and rode outside the gate. Willy, the bandit guard, was conscious, writhing in his bonds. His scared eyes sought the rugged face of his captor. Hatfield resumed his own Stetson and threw Willy over the sorrel, returning to the busy Nolan.

"I couldn't leave pore Willy outside in the cold all night," drawled the officer. "Everything needs to look right

when the boys ride home, Steve."

He gave Willy a drink. The outlaw only cursed him furiously, and Hatfield regagged him, checked his bonds, and left him tied to a post in the stockade.

"C'mon, let's load up pronto," ordered the Ranger as Nolan rode up, leading the pack mules. He glanced at the stars. "Gettin' late. I wonder what time they mean to attack the Valley?" By the sky he figured it was near eleven o'clock. "How long will it take to get over the mountain, Steve?"

"Oh, three, four hours. Light ain't so good."

"We can take some of these pitch torches along to guide us in the rough spots . . . Help me with these here boxes."

Fifteen minutes later they were climbing a steep rock slide at the mine end of the box canyon. The horses slipped, hoofs skidding on the loose shale. The mules, sure-footed, went up easily enough with their heavy packs.

Hatfield and Nolan had to hold on to two pairs of reins each, to pull at the animals behind them, for it was too precipitous for riding.

HOWEVER, after a hard ascent, up and around, they came onto a razorback ridge, and Steve Nolan pointed across a depression, lit for them by the rising moon.

"I seen Gogettum Miller shoot one of them Mexes up here the other day, Jim," he said. "I reckon the pore peon stole a hoss and escaped this way, but they caught up with him."

Now they could mount. Each man led a pack-mule, and Nolan, knowing the country well, hit out for the trail to the Valley cliffs.

Steve Nolan, a trained climber and familiar with the rocks, picked up the winding path, and they headed for Happy Valley as fast as possible. But it was slow going, in the night, and Nolan was tense with agony, while the tall Ranger kept glancing up at the inexorable passage of time spelled grandly out by the slow movements of the stars.

CHAPTER XX

Traitor's Warning

LONG before they reached the rim of the precipices, they heard the distant gunfire.

"They're at it!" Hatfield grunted. "The attack's begun. It's most two o'clock, Steve."

Nolan began cursing, feverishly, pressing toward the steep path cut in spiral steps in the cliffs. Ledges were narrow, and dangerous to negotiate in the dark. With entire disregard for their own necks, the two worked the four animals down to the Valley floor, and the volume of shooting rose in horrid crescendo, echoing to them through the canyon.

"Drawin' what they got in their guns, I reckon," observed Hatfield. "Then Comanche Ed'll charge. Can yuh handle both mules now, Steve?"

"Yeah. Go to it!"

"Run, Goldy," ordered the Ranger, and the golden sorrel streaked away down Happy Valley.

Louder and louder the exploding pistols and rifles sounded as he neared the end where the settlers lay behind their camp barricades. He caught the hoarse shouts of fighting men. The moon was well up, and the beams cast into the canyon. Flashes from a hundred enemy weapons were visible beyond the dark bulk of the Valley men's position. Comanche Ed Murphy was lying back, sure of his prey.

Hatfield whirled closer and closer. Within two hundred yards he whooped to his friends, those he sought to protect. A bullet whizzed over him. A hasty hand had fired on him, believing him to be a bandit attacker coming from the other wing.

"Hold it, Happy Valley, hold it!" he roared, his great voice booming over the reverberating gunfire. "It's Jim—Jim, the Ranger!"

"This way, Ranger!" That was Johnson Carter.

The firing of the Valley men was thin, compared with the rain of bullets sent in at long range by the outlaws. The Ranger could see that Co-

manche Ed had his men spread across to block any possible dash for escape past his band. Anyone who rode or ran up the canyon could easily be trapped.

But the enemy, too, heard Hatfield's stentorian hails, and a mass of green-hatted riders spurred around the flank to cut him off. The sorrel raced for it, the Ranger shooting his Colts at the oncoming killers to check them, give him time to reach the low barricade.

Johnson Carter crouched, a hot rifle in one hand, near a bulky, canvas-covered pile. At his side were Bert Lee and Franklin Green, the lean Yankee who had come to Texas.

Hatfield, putting the sorrel at the barricade, sailed over and pulled to a stop by the Valley men.

Johnson Carter's eyes were wide, glowing in the dim light. "Ranger," he said in a low, tense voice, "we're done for! Our ammunition's been tampered with . . . Keep huntin', boys. Mebbe yuh'll find some at the bottom that's all right."

Men were frantically hauling out cases, dumping them, examining the cartridges.

"We just discovered it," Carter went on. "Lots of 'em empty, others with the lead cut out. We've used what we had in our guns and there ain't any more!"

"No use to look farther," Hatfield said coolly. "It's no good. A traitor in yore camp fixed it, Carter. But Nolan's comin' up with plenty for yuh to drive off Comanche Ed."

He kept his voice down, leaning from his saddle to speak to the Valley chief. The blood rushed back to Carter's grim face, and new hope revitalized him.

"Nolan!" he roared. "Yuh mean Steve?"

"Yeah. Let me have a dozen young men to help him in."

BEE CARTER heard her father shout Steve's name, and she jumped up from the huddle of women and children placed in the enclosure at the camp's center to protect them from harm. Oblivious to the whining lead that sang over them, she ran to Hatfield and looked up into his stern eyes.

"Jim, Jim, is Steve all right?"

"Yes'm. But get down and take care of yoreself, Bee, or he won't be when he finds yuh hurt!"

Joy suffused her pretty features, as she obediently returned to shelter. Hatfield was in a hurry to help Nolan in with the mules, laden with leather hampers filled with .45-caliber and rifle cartridges, appropriated from the great store back at Wild Horse Canyon, the outlaw hide-out. Cowmen snatched mounts from a basin corral close to the river, where the animals were fairly safe from direct gunfire. They rode to join Hatfield, and the party jumped the barricade and pounded up the Valley.

Comanche Ed Murphy, sure of his prey, had been lying off at long range, drawing the settlers' ammunition without losing any of his force. But the appearance of Hatfield had roused him, and he sent twenty men in a swift spurt around the right side of the camp. They drove down at Hatfield and his party. Pistols flared in the night, lead sang about the riders' ears. Hatfield's Colts blasted back at an angle, and an outlaw screeched as he felt the terrible missiles of the Ranger strike.

There was no time to be lost. A full charge by Murphy's great gang would sweep on over the Valley fortress and engulf them in bloody death.

Over the popping of guns a strident voice shrieked, from the camp:

"Charge, you fools! Quick! Now!"

Hatfield heard it, as the high-pitched sound, carrying like a bugle call, echoed up the narrow spaces. His face darkened, and he stared back over his shoulder, Colt in hand.

Up the Valley, Nolan and his friends were meeting, calling out to each other. Steve Nolan had brought the two heavily laden mules up, and, covered by six riders on either flank, the ammunition was run to the barricade, while Hatfield, the sorrel zigzagging with his delicate gait at his knee pressures, held off the small bunch sent over by Comanche Ed Murphy.

Through the Valley bellowed Murphy's mighty voice:

"At 'em, boys, at 'em! Show no mercy!"

A line of fierce killers came pounding in upon the camp.

Lead touched the Ranger's flesh and nicked the sorrel's hide, but the shadowy, moving figure made a difficult target and the flare of the rider's heavy Colts spelled death for those who dared approach too closely. Nolan and his men, running the mules, dashed in and passed through a gap made by Carter's men.

Hatfield trailed them in.

"Lie down, Goldy, lie down," he ordered, and his mount, lathered and heaving from his run, obediently dropped with the Ranger's steady hand.

"Fill up, boys!" called Carter.

Hatfield stood by the vital, capacious leather hampers, spoke to the settler who came quickly to grab handfuls of cartridges.

"Hold yore fire till they're up, boys! Hold yore fire till the order—"

Shooting terrific volleys Comanche Ed Murphy and his great array of gunmen came charging at the camp. Valley men lay behind their shelters, waiting. Hatfield, grabbing a Winchester, and with Colts filled in his holsters, scuttled over, keeping low to escape the rush of lead that filled the air. Jolting pace, excitement, prevented careful aim by the attackers, but once in the camp, they could kill as they pleased.

TAKING the lead, crouched beside Johnson Carter, Hatfield gripped his rifle, as the bandits loomed larger in the darkness. When they were almost upon the barricade, confident and careless because the silence of the Valley guns convinced them the settlers had run out of bullets and that a tearing, terrific volley would decimate their ranks—

"Back, yuh fools! It's a trap, Murphy!"

Again that strident voice rang out, from the quiet camp. Comanche Ed Murphy, whooping it up in the center of his long line of killers, heard it. It was like a bucket of ice water thrown suddenly over a warm body.

"Circle!" bellowed Murphy, jerking his reins. "Watch out, men! Take it easy!"

"Fire, now!" snarled the Ranger, throwing his rifle to his shoulder and trying for the outlaw chief.

He knew he had wounded the King of the Chaparral, for Comanche Ed nearly jumped out of his leather, but Murphy was turning, even as Hatfield pulled trigger. The Valley men's guns banged at the churning line, and a dozen bandits crashed from their saddles, dead or wounded.

But the traitor's warning had saved the bulk of them. Forced to shoot, Hatfield swore as he saw the foe slanting off into the shadows. A sharp fire followed them, and they shot back, but their lead could do scant damage to the protected Valley fighters.

Jim Hatfield, cold rage in his heart, got up and hurried toward the spot from which he had heard that traitor's shout, which had saved the outlaws from a mortal blow. His strategy, so perfect, had been destroyed by the warning, and now Murphy knew the settlers had ample bullets for their weapons.

Stooped over, Colt in hand, Hatfield ran along the line of defenders. Bulky piles of supplies, tents and thick tree logs cut up the camp, with the murmur of the many souls who fought to defend their lives.

Franklin Green lay near the end of the line of men, a carbine in his hands. He was shooting out into the night at the shadowy, retreating figures on horseback there.

"Green!" growled the Ranger. "Who yelled that warnin' to Comanche Ed?"

"I dunno," the lean Yankee replied. "I heard him—but didn't see him. Seems to me he was over there, I think, near that high pile of side logs."

"Did you men see anybody?" demanded Hatfield.

Now that the outlaw fire was reduced, they had paused to take breath after their narrow escape.

"Nope," Green was the first to say.

Nor had the others caught sight of

the traitor. They had been too busy concentrating on the murderous enemy out in the night.

The guns were dying off. Hatfield, suspicion flaring his nostrils, rugged face frowning, went to the shadows behind the barricade, made of cut pine logs and other wood. It was dark in the corner, and a number of the felled trees that had been dragged in by Carter's men to build a rough breastworks were jumbled together to form a good hiding place for a man.

But it was empty now. Whoever had saved Murphy had scurried away.

CHAPTER XXI

No Escape!

OUT of sight behind the parapet, Hatfield struck a match, shaded it with his hand. The dirt was soft near the river bank, the grass beaten down. Then he saw several identations, made by the kneeling traitor. He turned, trying to follow this along, but many feet had trod the earth of the crowded camp.

The gray-green eyes narrowed. A circular, shallow depression, which he examined by the light of another match, caught his keen attention. He went and got a lantern from Carter, lit it, and hurried back. Women and older folks, as well as children, were safe from flying lead in the stockade center of the camp. Like a bloodhound on a hot scent, Hatfield followed the trail of the round little holes, deeper or shallower according to the firmness of the ground.

"Jim, where's Steve?" Anxiously Bee Carter called to the Ranger when she saw him coming, his nose to the sign.

"Reckon he's on the firin' line, Bee. Anybody come in yore shelter in the last few minutes?"

"No! Is Steve all right, Jim?" She couldn't think of anything except the man she loved.

"He's fine."

Hatfield, lantern shaded and down, stepped into the inner space, surrounded by piles of equipment, and more logs. Old folks, women crouched over their children, silently waited there the outcome of the battle.

"Howdy, Lait," Hatfield said.

The lame man looked up and smiled at him. A tin pail stood by his injured foot, filled with water that was rocking from side to side. His makeshift crutch lay close to his hand, as he leaned back against the stockade wall.

"Didn't Lait just come in, Bee?" he asked the pretty girl.

"Oh, I guess so," Bee replied. "The children needed fresh water."

"I went out to get some for 'em," Lait said coolly. "I didn't mind the danger."

"Stop lyin'!" snapped Hatfield. "Yore crutch, that yuh used when there was a chance yuh'd be spotted, Lait, left a telltale mark wherever yuh leaned on it! The water's the other way from the way yuh went. Why did yuh cry that warnin' to Comanche Ed Murphy?"

Lait's eyes darkened, but his lips pursed. "I don't savvy what yuh mean, suh."

"And quit tryin' to talk like a Westerner," snarled Hatfield. "It don't go. Stand up."

With a resigned air, Gary Lait painfully got up, leaning heavily on his crutch.

"Wait here," commanded Hatfield. "I'm goin' to call Carter."

The Ranger turned away but as he passed Lait, his quick foot kicked out the crutch. The startled Lait caught himself on his supposedly injured foot, standing an instant before he thought to cry out. Then he fell in a heap, moaning.

"Jim—how could you?" the shocked Bee cried, coming to stoop over the writhing Lait.

"Hold the light, Bee. He's fakin'. Wait'll I look at that foot!"

He seized Lait's thick sock, pulled it off, and ripped a bandage from the ankle and foot. By the lantern, he examined the joint, twisting it this way and that, while Lait cried out in agony: "He's killin' me! Stop, stop!"

"Yuh can walk as well as I can," Hatfield growled. "Nothin' wrong with yore foot. Them bruises are most healed. Mebbe it was bad when yuh come to Carter's, but it's all right now. And I'll tell yuh yore name. It's Costerman, John Costerman!"

"Yuh—yuh're loco," wailed Lait. "I don't savvy what yuh're talkin' about!"

ONLY scattered firing sounded in the night. Hatfield sang out, and Johnson Carter, trailed by Franklin Green and Bert Lee, hurried to answer Hatfield.

"There's yore traitor," the Ranger said, pointing at the prostrate Lait. "He's been tippin' off the enemy and he's the one that shouted to Murphy. I reckon his right name is Costerman, and it's him who's caused all yore trouble, Carter."

Johnson Carter, mouth open in amazement, scratched his head.

"Why, Ranger, he's lame, ain't he? His foot was hurt bad when he rode up to my ranch. Bleedin' and swollen. He was a stranger, but we don't ask questions."

"Reckon a rock fell on him, while he was up there blowin' the cliff over the Nolans," said the Ranger coldly.

He was chagrined at his failure to crush Comanche Ed, King of the Chaparral. The hypocritical Lait, or Costerman, as he believed the slimy traitor to be, had spoiled his plan.

Steve Nolan, bedraggled and stained with blood and powder, jumped to the inner stockade gate.

"They're comin' ag'in, Jim!" he cried.

"Steve!"

Bee Carter, forgetting everything else, ran to him and threw her arms about the cowboy's neck. He kissed her, smiling down at her.

"Bee! Mighty glad, honey, to see yuh. I didn't think I'd ever get back to yuh."

Hatfield stooped, ran his hands over Lait. He drew a loaded six-shooter from inside the man's shirt. The brown eyes glared up at the tall officer with a red fury, as Hatfield handled him roughly, trying to make him break. But Lait refused to fight. He only protested, sticking to his rôle.

Gunshots were ringing outside.

"Keep guard on this snake, Steve," Hatfield ordered. "He's a traitor. Kill him if he tries to escape."

He hurried out, and took the line, shooting at the approaching gunmen. But Comanche Ed was lying back, himself. The charge was half-hearted and, when the Valley weapons blared, the outlaws hesitated, broke and rode off down the trail.

"They're on their way, Ranger!" Johnson Carter cried. He slapped Hatfield's back, thanking him for his great work.

"We can't leave Murphy and his gang loose," Hatfield said. "Carter, give me thirty men, young ones who can climb and ride fast. The rest of yuh stick here, 'case Comanche don't do the way I figger he will."

Steve Nolan wanted to go, but the cowboy was utterly done in, from the hard treatment he had undergone at the mining camp. Johnson Carter picked thirty strong fellows, and they were mounted on the best mustangs the Valley could rope.

The outlaws, realizing the entrenched settlers could not be taken, afraid to run onto the fresh-loaded guns, had turned and ridden down the Valley, headed for the chaparral. They left thirty bodies behind them, and carried off a good deal of lead. But, thanks to Lait's treachery, they had not been smashed, as Hatfield had planned.

Hatfield was drawn from the long fight, but his steel nerve kept him going. The terrific strength of the Ranger called forth new reserves for the vital tasks remaining.

Having hastily seen to Goldy and snatched a bite to eat, Jim Hatfield spoke to Carter as he prepared to ride.

"Whatever yuh do, don't let Gary Lait escape, Carter," he warned. "Keep an armed guard on him and hold him till I get back. I'm dead shore he's really Costerman, the leader ag'in yuh."

Johnson Carter nodded, pressed the slim, strong hand of the rider.

"Thanks, Jim. Yuh're a fine friend!"

The grayness of the new dawn was touching the towering cliffs. A faint ray of light caught the silver star on silver circle, emblematic of the Texas Rangers, pinned now to the tall officer's shirt.

"Let's go, boys," he ordered, and swung up the Valley. . . .

* * * * *

Comanche Ed Murphy, King of the Chaparral, cursed a sulphurous streak as he spurred his thorn-torn, worn-out gray mustang through the narrow gate into Wild Horse Canyon.

He suffered from frustrated rage, for once again the Texas Ranger had outwitted and outfought him and his whole evil crew. And he also suffered from another Ranger bullet, for one of Hatfield's shots had cut a deep chunk out of his cheek. It had bled all over him before clotting up, and even now it oozed down his crusted chin.

It was after noon, the sun beating hot from the sky. His men, the seventy-odd who were able to ride back to camp with him, bunched in after him. They were dusty, scratched, bad-tempered like their chief. Many had wounds, more or less painful, and all were tired and felt the same irritation at being balked of prey they had considered certain.

A thin column of smoke rose from a fire near the stockade, but Comanche Ed Murphy, turning toward the horse corral, did not see any of the skeleton guard he had left there under Gogettum Miller. His gunmen were crowding in. They had stayed pretty well together on the return trip.

"Hey, Miller!" bellowed Comanche Ed. "Yore goldarned Limey, Costerman, give us a bum steer agin! We near got wiped out!"

Only empty echoes answered him, and he pulled up, with his fierce-faced riders piling to a halt at his broad back.

"What the devil!" he muttered. "Funny! Mebbe the fools are workin' in the mine!" He turned his ugly, fishy eyes that way, but nothing stirred in Wild Horse Canyon. "No guard out. Gogettum must've gone loco!" And, as he turned to look back: "I don't like it," he muttered.

The outlaws, with the scattering of miners Gogettum had furnished, were dismounting, flinging themselves wearily to the ground. A few stragglers were entering the gate. As the King of the Chaparral, smelling danger, stared that way, the whole world suddenly flared in a gigantic explosion. The pass belched fire. Smoke and an immense cloud of dirt, rocks, and what was left of the bandits directly over the spot, were hurled into the blue sky.

Comanche Ed was knocked off his stricken mustang, which staggered as though an irresistible, invisible hand had pushed him. Falling to the ground, for seconds Murphy lay there, unable to move.

The concussion of the air was so terrific that the bushes and trees bent before it. The mighty explosion over, the sounds banged away, clapping in the distance like retreating thunder, and a rain of rocks, dirt and other items thrown into the sky began.

Blinking, biting his lip, Murphy pulled himself together, pushing up to his great, booted feet. Some of his men had been knocked senseless and lay motionless as they had gone down. Others, like himself, were rising, dazed and not realizing what had happened. Then the King of the Chaparral heard his master's voice, the commanding tones of the Texas Ranger:

"Throw down, outlaws! Yuh're covered!"

Comanche Ed gasped a curse, eyes widening. He could now see the menacing rifles, some thirty of them, stuck from surrounding high rocks.

"The Ranger!" he muttered, blanching, and threw himself down as he reached for his Colt. Surrender to the law meant a rope's end for him. "Fight, boys, fight!" he roared.

BULLETS whipped over him, but then he was up, a hard-fighting devil, running, zigzagging and down, shooting as he made for a mustang close at hand. He got behind a clump of trees and leaped to saddle. He knew that his men were going down like falling autumn leaves because he had

ordered them to fight, but he thought he might escape in the rush, might ride from the trap.

The confused outlaws, whipping out Colts, shot at their hidden opponents. Glad at having a chance to get away, leaving his men to hold the bag, the King of the Chaparral dug in his spurs and, low over the horse, flashed for the gate. A handful of other quick thinkers had followed suit, and started out. The rifles were snapping their loads of death into the fighting bandits.

Lead sang thick over the canyon which a few minutes before had been so still and peaceful.

Eyes narrowed to the wind, Comanche Ed rode as he had never ridden before, fervently hoping that the following bullets would miss. He could hear them in his ears, snapping at his Stetson and clothing. He emptied his Colt back at his foes, to shake their aim.

What he saw as he glanced over his shoulder was hot and horrid. His killers were falling, wounded, or were surrendering. He glimpsed the tall Ranger as Hatfield, with Colts blazing, directed the attack.

Then Comanche Ed looked ahead, comforted by the fact that he was almost to the exit, on his way.

"My Gawd-amighty!" he gasped.

His horse came to a sliding stop and the rider nearly pitched over the mount's head.

The explosion had totally blocked the pass with stones, rubble, the cave-in of the side cliffs.

There was no escape!

CHAPTER XXII

Trail's End

HURRIEDLY whistling to the sorrel as the outlaw resistance suddenly quit, torn by the appalling facts of the officer's strategy, Hatfield leaped to leather and spurred after the King of the Chaparral.

"Throw down yore gun, Murphy!" he shouted. "The party's over!"

Comanche Ed snapped the trigger of an empty Colt as he saw his arch-enemy coming. Then, knowing only death could strike now, with no way out, he flung the gun to earth and dismounted, folded his mighty arms and glowered at the tall officer on the sorrel.

He had one hope: later on, he might break away.

"Yuh got me, Ranger," he growled, between gritted teeth. "But man to man, I could tear yuh to pieces. Yuh been lucky."

Hatfield smiled. His voice was gentle as he said, "Why, now, Comanche, don't take it so hard. There's

The Texas Ranger

Let's drink a toast and proudly boast
Of the Texas Ranger man,
Who saved the West and did his best
To help his fellow man.

Through fire and flame he was the same
Cool-headed, modest chap,
Whose fightin' fame an' six-gun aim
Put Texas on the map!

—TEX MUMFORD.

an end to *every* rope."

Murphy blinked, the blood flushing his ugly cheeks. Up the canyon, outlaws sat or stood or lay dead or wounded. Or they were quitting, while Hatfield's Valley posse swiftly took their weapons. The King of the Chaparral stared as the Ranger unbuckled his gun-belt, hung it carefully on the horn, took off his Stetson, and flung it aside, girding himself as, afoot, he faced Comanche.

"I'd like to make shore what yuh say ain't true, Murphy," Hatfield remarked, a faint smile on his wide mouth. "Let's go."

Murphy's chin jutted and his great fists clenched. As the Ranger came in, light as a deer on the balls of his feet, Murphy sent a haymaker that would have knocked the head from Hatfield's shoulders had it landed. But it whizzed harmlessly in the air as the Ranger sidestepped and struck a jolting blow to Murphy's nose with his hard left. Tears sprang to the giant's little blue eyes. He roared as blood spurted from his injured member, and blindly rushed at his opponent.

Clear-eyed, scientific, Hatfield hit him again and again in the face, closed an eye, tore his cheek, opening the bullet scar there. The few punches Comanche Ed landed had lost their sting, and Hatfield took the attack as Murphy paused, lungs bellowsing for breath. Striking sledgehammer fists ripped into the King of the Chaparral. Comanche Ed bent over, and the Ranger's uppercut broke his teeth.

The mighty bandit teetered and fell over on his side. Through swollen eyes, now shot through with sheer terror, he looked up at his conqueror and begged for mercy.

"I'm beat, Ranger," he gasped.

Hatfield stood over him, regarding him. Such a brute, when finally broken, might be useful. And his mentality would, in surrender, yield entirely to the victor. His fear had drowned all other emotions in Comanche Ed.

"Don't kill me!" he begged.

The Ranger scowled down at him. "Yuh can save yore hide by talkin', Murphy. There's something I'd like to clear up! How come yuh hooked up with Costerman, after attackin' one of his ore trains?"

Murphy blinked, realizing that Hatfield knew a great deal.

"Shucks, Ranger. I didn't savvy what the stuff was, even after we took it. Then I connected with Costerman."

"And throwed in with him. We got Costerman, and Gogettum's dead. Costerman says you run the whole show."

"Why, the coyote!" howled Murphy. "He lies like the devil! He's the chief! It was all his idea!"

HATFIELD drew forth more information that cleared minor points for him. Leaving the captives to be brought in by his aides, he mounted Goldy and headed back to Happy Valley.

Night had come when he pulled up and dismounted at the settlers' camp. Johnson Carter and Steve Nolan came to greet him and shake his hand.

"The gang's finished—we took 'em all," reported the Ranger. "Where's Gary Lait? He's really John Costerman, as I figgered, and the feller who caused yore trouble, folks."

"Blast him, he got away," growled Nolan. "Green was guardin' him. Lait asked for a drink of water, and when Green looked away to get it, Lait drew a little derringer he had hid under his armpit and shot Franklin. Then he jumped up, and grabbed a hoss. He made the chaparral and we couldn't find him."

"How long ago?"

Green, Hatfield was sure, was an honest man, a victim of Costerman like the rest. His investigation had proved it.

"A couple hours, just after dark fell," Carter told him. "Green ain't hurt bad; we ain't blamin' him too much, Ranger."

Hatfield drank, ate, spoke with his friends, the people he had saved. But he could not tarry for long, with Costerman free.

"I know where he'll head for," he mused. "He's too smart to ride to the mine."

On the sorrel, he hit the trail an hour afterward. . . .

Indianola hummed in the late afternoon. The great bay of Matagorda, with the deep-blue Gulf beyond, fringed by magnificent live oaks with trailing Spanish moss, palms, skirted by lagoons, shone in the last rays of the sun.

Hatfield, on Goldy, sat his saddle on the waterfront street, watching the dock where the *Mermaid* had touched. Shipping cluttered the harbor—sailboats, barges, steamers and every sort of craft. The town was filled with cattlemen, traders, riffraff, and men of the sea.

His vigil was finally rewarded as a sailboat came in, touching at the pier, and a fat figure, a fringe of red hair showing under his cap, leaped from the bow and ran up the stringpiece, turning into the road. It was Manager Slattery, from the refinery.

Hatfield trailed him, as Slattery hurried up the street and turned into a waterfront tavern. Lights were going on around the town, as the sun dropped from sight. Dismounting, the Ranger went up on the saloon porch and slouched by the open door. Slattery was standing at the bar, looking down the room. Presently a slender man, with a narrow face, shaven smooth now, and in a clean blue suit, came swiftly from the rear to join Slattery, who seized his hand and pumped it.

"Costerman!" cried Slattery. "Hi 'ad your message and come right h'over. We're hin 'ot water, Chief. Some bloody law hofficer come to the h'island h'and—"

"Shut up," snapped Costerman. "Did you bring all the money you had?"

"Sure."

"There's a ship sailing for Cuba in half an hour. We'll be on it. The game's finished, so—"

He broke off. In the bar mirror ahead, he saw the reflection of the Ranger as the tall officer silently stepped in.

Slattery was slow to comprehend, slow to react. But John Costerman, alias Gary Lait, knew what it meant. His hand flashed to his coat pocket, and he whipped out a snub-nosed revolver. Seizing Slattery by the arm, he threw the fat manager in front of him as he fired.

THE bullet cut a chunk from Hatfield's leg flesh, but the long-barreled Colt roared its reply, snapping onto the crack of Costerman's weapon. Aim steady and careful, unhurried, Hatfield put a heavy slug of lead into Costerman's visible shoulder.

It whipped the Cornishman around, and his head went back, teeth gritting in agony. Slattery, aware of the dan-

ger to himself, uttered a wail of terror and sank to his knees, begging for mercy, exposing his Chief's vitals. Costerman, his gun dropping, fired a second time, but the bullet only kicked up splinters between the Ranger's spread boots.

Hatfield's answer hit Costerman square in the center of the forehead, and he fell, dead.

Nostrils flared, the Ranger stood there, blood dripping down his leg, a curl of smoke slowly issuing from his blue-steel Colt.

The bartender let out a sharp cry.

"Hey, you! What in thunder's goin' on? Put up that gun!"

The Ranger turned, and the man caught the glint of light on the silver star, set on silver circle.

"Texas Rangers!" he shouted, backing down. "The place is yores, Mr. Big Jigger!"

* * * * *

Captain Bill McDowell looked up from his lunch. He had just consumed

two cans of baked beans, deliciously cooked with salt pork, a can of tender beef, and four bottles of beer, and he felt better.

A snack in the middle of the day did a man good.

"Hatfield!" he cried, pushing back his chair and leaping up to greet his star Ranger, reporting back at the Austin headquarters.

The tall man showed his even teeth in a grin, and took the chair McDowell indicated.

"Glad to see yuh," rumbled McDowell. "Did yuh meet up with Comanche Ed? And how 'bout Happy Valley?"

"Theres thirty county sheriffs fightin' for who's to hang Murphy," reported Jim Hatfield. "Happy Valley's safe. Them cliffs 're as strong as they ever were. A sidewinder with a big idea of usin' the Valley for a water-head murdered Ben Nolan and blew down some rocks, tryin' to scare 'em away."

"Huh! Yuh don't say. Who is he?"

"Well, he went part of the time by the name of Gary Lait. He got his foot hurt in the rocks when he killed Ben Nolan, and the Carters helped him. Then he stuck and acted as a spy on 'em. His real name's Costerman, John Costerman, and he's from Cornwall, England."

McDOWELL whistled, reached for a yellow paper.

"Then mebbe yuh can explain this cable we got from Scotland Yard!"

It read:

THANKS TO THE TEXAS RANGERS FOR INFORMATION ON JOHN COSTERMAN, WANTED HERE FOR MURDER AND ROBBERY. TURN SLATTERY OVER TO BRITISH CONSUL AT GALVESTON.

"I caught up with Costerman at Indianola, and he wouldn't surrender," drawled Hatfield. "Slattery's in jail there. Him and Comanche Ed told me what I hadn't been able to dig out, Cap'n. Costerman and Murphy hooked gangs to wipe out the Valley. They had a mine backed up to Happy Valley, but it was expensive workin' it, and they needed the Valley for a reservoir, for hydraulic minin'."

"What kind of mine?" demanded McDowell.

HATFIELD picked up one of the emptied cans from which McDowell had been eating.

"This here's the cause of it all, Cap'n. Tin. It's all the rage. Everything's bein' canned now, yuh know."

"Tin! Never knowed we had any in Texas."

"Me, either. There ain't much in the whole United States. But there's plenty of it for a big fortune in that mountain—cassiterite or tinstone—and mighty rich. As I said, hydraulic minin's best, and by dammin' the Valley end, Costerman could've built up pressure and run pipes through. Then he meant to build a refinery on the spot and clean up. Him and Slattery escaped from England with some money they stole and come to Texas, to escape the police. Costerman was born in Cornwall, England, where there's been tin mines for a long while. In fact, when he was younger he done worked in 'em and learned the process. While he was in the bush, hidin' out from the law, he come on that deposit of cassiterite and decided to take it. But he wanted that Valley, for water, for power from the falls of the Green River."

Hatfield paused, staring at the innocent tin cans. Armies could travel on them, pioneers breast the new wilderness, delicacies be kept through heat and through winter months.

"Then the Valley's really happy ag'in?" growled McDowell.

"Yes, suh. Young Steve Nolan, Ben's son, is hitchin' up with Bee Carter, and they make a handsome pair, Cap'n."

McDowell cleared his throat, looked past the tall man out the window. In the sunshine stood Goldy, the Ranger's trail comrade and able equine assistant.

The old man rattled a fresh report he extracted from his pile of papers, and held it out to Jim Hatfield.

"Trouble, always trouble," growled McDowell.

Jim Hatfield's gray-green eyes brightened. He scanned the sheriff's complaint, from a distant county, and got to his feet.

"I'm ready to ride, Cap'n."

"Yuh're always ready, Jim. Texas leans on yuh, Ranger."

A beam of sunlight, stealing through the window, flashed on the bright but humble tin cans standing on the desk. It touched the rugged, calm face of Jim Hatfield, as he rose, starting again on a mission against the evil cohorts who fought against his mighty empire.

NEXT ISSUE'S GRIPPING COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

LONE STAR WRATH

By JACKSON COLE

FEATURING JIM HATFIELD AT HIS FIGHTING BEST

Get this, men, if you have trouble
With tender skin and wiry stubble:
Those Thin Gillettes—four for a dime—
Give slick, clean shaves, save dough and time!
New kind of edges on steel hard enough to cut glass
Gillette
BLADES
4 for 10¢
Produced By The Maker Of The Famous Gillette Blue Blade
Save Extra Money! Get The Big New Economy Package, 12 For 27¢

FAMOUS TEXAS RANGERS

CAPTAIN TOM HICKMAN

CAPTAIN TOM HICKMAN AND RANGER STANLEY WERE IN CLARKSVILLE ON ROUTINE BUSINESS ONE DAY IN 1926 --- THE DAY THAT THREE BANDITS DECIDED TO HOLD UP THE RED RIVER NATIONAL BANK

I'LL MEET YOU HERE AT THE CAR IN ABOUT AN HOUR, STANLEY!

OKAY, CAPTAIN!

PASSING THE BANK, CAPTAIN HICKMAN SPOTTED THE ROBBERS AT WORK

I'VE WALKED RIGHT INTO A ROBBERY!

RIVER

IONAL

RED

NAT

HICKMAN RAN TO THE CAR FOR HIS RIFLE, THEN SOUGHT OUT STANLEY, WHOM HE FOUND TALKING WITH TWO LOCAL OFFICERS

HURRY, BOYS, WE'VE A LITTLE ROBBERY TO BREAK UP!

WE'LL WAIT FOR THEM TO COME OUT! KEEP YOUR DISTANCE, BUT FLANK EACH SIDE OF THE DOOR. I'LL TAKE UP MY POSITION ACROSS THE STREET FACING THE DOOR!

AS THE BANDITS EMERGED, HICKMAN ORDERED THEM TO SURRENDER

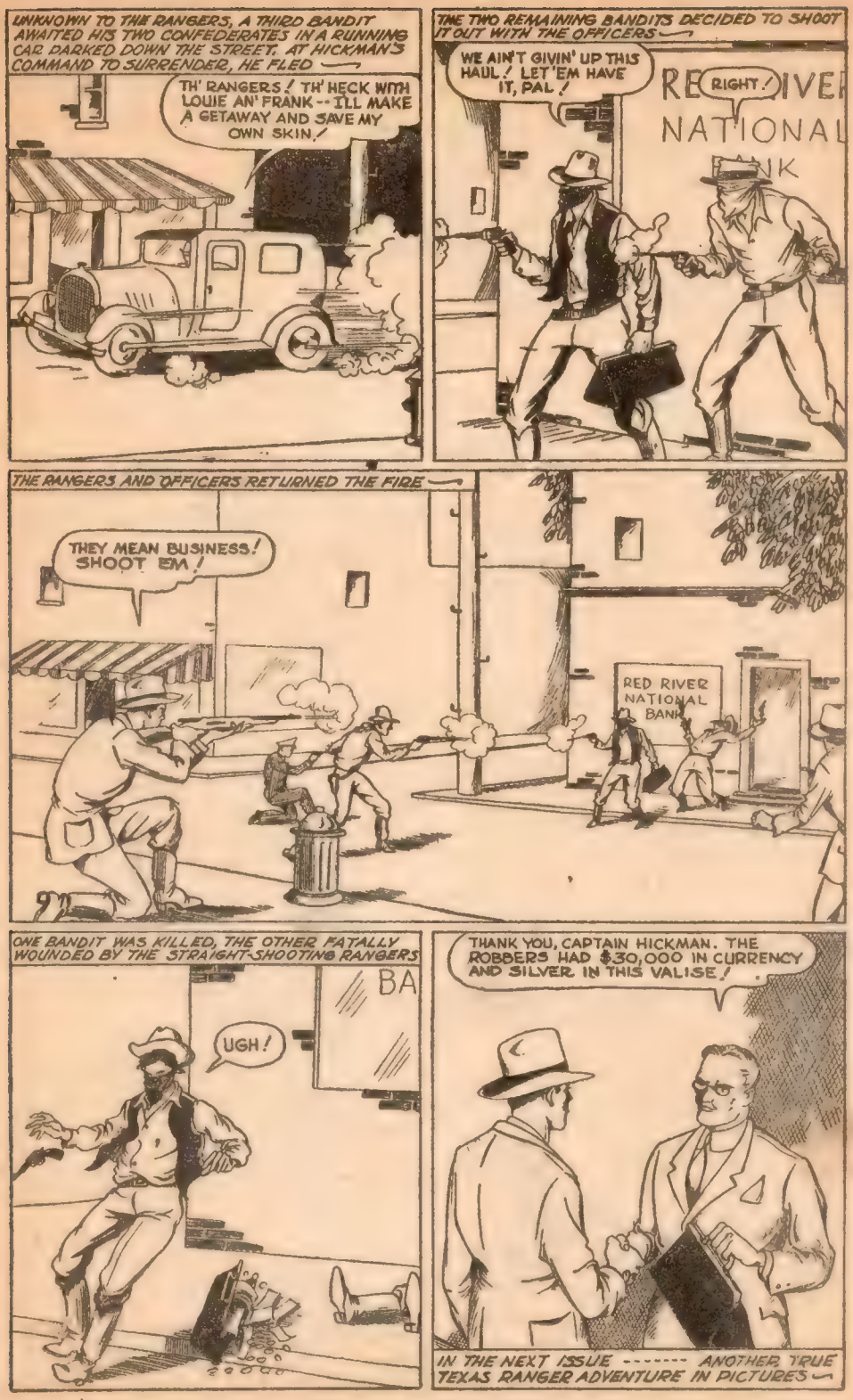
UP WITH YOUR HANDS --- WE'VE GOT YOU COVERED!

RED RIVER NATIONAL BANK

RED R

NATIO

BAN


UNKNOWN TO THE RANGERS, A THIRD BANDIT AWAITED HIS TWO CONFEDERATES IN A RUNNING CAR PARKED DOWN THE STREET. AT HICKMAN'S COMMAND TO SURRENDER, HE FLED
TH' RANGERS! TH' HECK WITH LOUIE AN' FRANK -- I'LL MAKE A GETAWAY AND SAVE MY OWN SKIN!
THE TWO REMAINING BANDITS DECIDED TO SHOOT IT OUT WITH THE OFFICERS
WE AIN'T GIVIN' UP THIS HAUL! LET 'EM HAVE IT, PAL!
RIGHT!
NATIONAL
THE RANGERS AND OFFICERS RETURNED THE FIRE
THEY MEAN BUSINESS! SHOOT 'EM!
RED RIVER NATIONAL BANK
ONE BANDIT WAS KILLED, THE OTHER FATALLY WOUNDED BY THE STRAIGHT-SHOOTING RANGERS
UGH!
THANK YOU, CAPTAIN HICKMAN. THE ROBBERS HAD $30,000 IN CURRENCY AND SILVER IN THIS VALISE!
IN THE NEXT ISSUE ------- ANOTHER TRUE TEXAS RANGER ADVENTURE IN PICTURES

THE TROUBLE SMITH

By JAMES CLYDE HARPER

Author of "Mark of Hate," "The Bronc Buster," etc.

His Life's Work Jeopardized by a Trio of Killers, Walt Payne Gives the Sidewinders a Lesson in Horsemanship!

WALT PAYNE took the repaired spur from the cooling tub, wiped it dry, and handed it to the fat, thick-bodied stranger. The man had an appearance similar to a huge, flabby frog, and he grunted in discomfort as he bent to buckle on the spur. Then he straightened up and spoke.

"How much?" he asked.

"Four bits," stated Walt, brusquely.

The fat stranger handed over a half-dollar and went out the door. When he got outside, one of his two waiting companions brought the horses from the shade of the cottonwood beside the small smithy shop. This man was the tallest of the three, and the most restless.

The third of the trio was the smallest, a wiry, sandy-haired man with fair skin which sun and wind had burned a pinkish-tan instead of

The mine guard took good care of Pinkie

brown. The trio mounted briskly and rode west along the stage-freighter trail.

A worried frown puckered Walt's honest, friendly young face as he watched them ride away. Outlaw was stamped in the grim, tight-lipped faces of the three. It was in their restless, searching eyes, and especially in the low, quick-draw sag of their heavy six-guns.

That they had shown up on this particular day wasn't a coincidence, Walt feared, just as he doubted the reason for their visit to his smithy. The rowel pin of the fat man's spur had been worn some, but was far from needing replacement. The fat man had waited inside while Walt made the new pin, but the other two strangers had loitered out near their horses.

The fat man had scanned every nook and corner of the smithy shop, Walt knew, and through the small smithy window, Walt had observed that the other two were thoroughly studying the outside surroundings. It appeared as if the three had come purposefully to size up the place, and Walt believed he knew why.

A gold shipment worth thirty thousand dollars would be on the stage-freighter, which would pass Walt's station after dark. The gold was being shipped to the railroad fifty miles south, and if the delivery was not completed, Walt would lose everything he possessed, and twenty persons would each lose a thousand dollars.

As Walt stared after the trio, he saw a rider approach them along the stage trail. He met them about a half-mile from the station. And after an apparent exchange of words with the fat leader, the newcomer turned his horse and rode with them, toward the west, and toward Ledge City.

Walt Payne's concern increased. He had recognized the rider. It was Tommy Berkley, brother of the girl Walt was engaged to marry. That he had turned and ridden off with the three strangers worried and puzzled Walt.

Frowning, the young smithy banked the fire in the forge and removed his leather apron. He pulled the door to his establishment shut, went outside. He caught his riding bronc from the small corral behind the station buildings. After quickly saddling his mount, he started in the direction of Ledge City.

Five years ago Walt and big, affable Dave Davis had quit punching cows and opened up their hundred-mile passenger-freight stage line. Their route extended through rough, uninhabited mountain country. But Walt and Dave knew short-cuts and passes through the mountains, where husky teams and a strong stage coach could get through.

They pooled their savings to purchase two husky two-span teams, and Walt, who had a knack with tools, had built their big coach. He reinforced it throughout with iron bars and braces, so that it could stand the grueling mountain trail. He designed special brakes for use on down grades, and made the coach into two compartments.

THE front compartment accommodated six passengers, and the rear compartment could sustain heavy loads of freight. Dave did the driving out on the trail, while Walt took care of the station. In the five years they had done pretty well. Their route, though rougher, was much quicker than the old, circuitous, three-hundred-mile valley trek between the two terminal points of their line—the railroad town to the south and the thriving outpost settlement to the west.

Freight and supplies were practically all they carried the first two years, then gold had been discovered back in the mountains five miles north of their route. They got the contract

bringing in equipment and supplies to develop the mine, and workers and their families to work in the mine. Because the mine was accessible only by pack-train or horseback from the stage route, a branch office had been built at Ledge City.

As the mine developed, Walt and Dave got the contract transporting the gold shipments from the branch office to the railroad. Unable to get carrier insurance on the shipments because of the desolate, uninhabited condition of the rough mountainous country, Walt and Dave had pledged their teams and equipment. That had sufficed, at first. But the shipments grew more valuable as the mine progressed, and more security was required.

Walt and Dave went to friends in the railroad town and outpost settlement, and got twenty co-signers on their personal bond, each co-signer pledged for one thousand dollars if Walt and Dave failed to make delivery of any gold shipment.

Dave had elected to transport the gold at night, so that at any robbery attempt, he could drop the strong-box off into the trail-side brush, and return later and pick it up.

THUS far, Walt and Dave had not lost a shipment. If they should lose one now, not only would they lose their teams and equipment, but twenty friends would also suffer. . . .

It was mid-afternoon when Walt reached Ledge City. The town consisted of but one building—the mine's branch office. It was built upon a sheer-faced, twenty-foot ledge, and Gale Berkley had laughingly named the place Ledge City when she arrived to take charge of the branch.

Aware that thieves and bandits might be attracted by the incoming shipments of equipment and supplies, and outgoing shipments of gold, the mine owners had made the branch office and storeroom an impregnable fortress.

The entire structure was of logs twelve inches thick. The only approach to the building was along the stage trail, and the only possible way to reach the single door was up the flight of wooden steps which bridged the twenty-foot sheer drop from the top of the ledge to the stage trail below. Stationed inside with the thick door barred, one man with a pocketful of ammunition could hold off a large force of attackers, and take his leisure about picking them off as they came along the stage trail, or tried to mount the wooden steps.

Walt tied his horse to a bannister of the steps, and went up to the door. Gale met him at the top of the steps. The gold shipment was already there, he saw, in the heavy, padlocked strong-box. The special mine guard sat on it, a Winchester across his knees.

"Hello, Walt." Gale's welcome was gay. "What are you doing here?"

"Got lonesome," he said, grinning. "A feller gets awfully tired being alone all the time."

Gale gave him a rich, warm smile, and there was matching warmth in her eyes. It made Walt's world seem brighter, just to see Gale smile and hear her laugh. Walt had told her that one night, when the mellow moon was full and bright, and the scent of dewy sage was on the soft wind. Walt had asked her to marry him.

Her answer had been two soft, gentle words.

"Yes, Walt."

Walt left her that night with his head in the clouds. They intended to get married in two weeks, but three days later Tommy, Gale's brother, was hurt pretty badly when an outlaw bronc spilled him. The doctors said it would take specialized hospital treatment for Tommy ever to walk again. As they prepared to send him to the hospital in far-away Texas, Gale had called off the wedding.

"I'll have to keep working at the office," she explained. "It'll cost lots of money to take care of Tommy."

"Me and Dave are going pretty well with the line," Walt told her. "We can make it all right, honey."

"No." Gale shook her head. "I wouldn't start out burdening you this way, Walt. Not for the world."

WALT tried to convince her that her troubles were his troubles, that they could make it easily enough. Gale kissed him, but refused to be swayed. After they'd brought Tommy home and all the hospital bills were paid, she said, if Walt still wanted her, she'd be waiting. But until then —no.

Two years passed. Walt saved enough to buy furniture and remodel his living quarters at the relief station into a suitable home. Then, two weeks ago, Tommy came home, his broken legs healed, his twisted, fractured back mended. Walt wanted to ask Gale to marry him the day Tommy returned. Instead he had waited, kept silent. But Walt couldn't keep his eyes silent. They had said things then, and were saying the same things now.

Smiling, Gale understood. She gently shook her head.

"Not yet, Walt," she said. "I still owe the hospital two hundred dollars. But we'll get it paid pretty soon. Tommy thinks he'll be able to take back his old job at the mine in a week or so. He's gaining strength rapidly. He went for a ride this afternoon, said he might come out to visit you. Did he?"

For a moment, Walt Payne was silent. He was remembering that rider he'd seen join the outlaw trio. Then Walt spoke carelessly.

"I reckon he decided to ride some other way. Well, guess I'd better be getting back to the station. Got to have the other team ready when Dave gets there. So long, Gale." He grinned good-by, went to the door. He turned then and addressed the mine guard. "Say, I've figgered out a new toe plate to help Dave's teams in pulling, especially up-hill or in wet weather. Trying a pair on my bronc's front feet. Come with me and see what yuh think about 'em."

The guard followed, carrying his rifle. Walt went to his horse, lifted a front foot. The guard's curious interest gave way to frown.

"New?" he scoffed. "Why they ain't even a toe plate on that—"

"I know," interrupted Walt quietly. "But bend over and act like yuh're looking at one anyhow, in case Gale's watching. I didn't want to tell yuh in front of her. No use alarming her. But you and Dave keep yore eyes open and yore trigger-fingers limber when yuh leave here. Three tough-looking hombres are in the valley. They didn't come up here just to admire the scenery."

The guard's mouth tightened, and he nodded. Walt let the bronc's foot back to the ground. The tight-lipped guard returned to his post atop the strong-box. Walt untied his mount and swung into the saddle.

He felt better now that he had warned Dave and the mine guard to be on their toes. Both were crack shots with six-guns and rifles. The fat man and his companions would have a tough time taking the gold from them.

Back at the station, Walt cooked and ate supper, then went to the corral and harnessed the two-span relief team. The relief station and smithy shop was established at the center mark of the hundred-mile route. By the time a team had traveled its portion of the route over the grueling, mountainous trail, it was pretty well spent.

So the relief station had been established down in the small valley where there was water and shade and grass. While Dave had one team out on the

trail, Walt fed and watered and cared for the other team, and repaired harnesses and other equipment, and reshod the horses when they needed new shoes.

Walt tied the four horses inside the corral near the gate with tie-ropes, then went and built up the fire in the forge, in case a doubletree or something else needed repairing when Dave arrived with the stage. Then he went inside and buckled on his Colt.

DUSK was beginning to fall when riders came along the trail from the direction of Ledge City. Walt recognized the fat man in the lead, and his hand crept near his gun. But the fat man blandly rode on up to the circle of light cast by the lamp through the open doorway. Behind him was Tommy Berkley.

Coolly, the fat man dismounted, motioned for Tommy to do likewise. Walt wondered where the other two owlhooters were. Almost instantly he knew.

"Raise yore hands, or I'll blow yuh wide open," growled a voice from Walt's left.

The pinkish-tan man stepped around the corner of the building, his gun levelled with Walt's heart. Walt raised his hands, realizing that the man had, under cover of the dusky-dark, circled the station to get the drop on him. Walt cursed silently for having been so careless.

The fat man took Walt's gun and cartridge belt. He extracted the cartridges from the gun, tossed both weapon and belt in the sand beside the wall. The other gunman took the horses behind the station and hitched them to the corral fence near the gate. This done, he rejoined the others in front of the station.

The fat man sat down on the wooden bench beside the wall, wiped his hot, perspiring face. Tommy Berkley stood apart from them, avoided Walt Payne's gaze.

"We'll get it," said the fat man to his small companion, "without firing a shot. It's just like the kid figgered."

"The kid?" Walt asked.

"Yeah." The fat man indicated Tommy. He laughed, and said: "Tell him, kid. It was all yore idea."

Tommy spoke tersely, his eyes fastened on the ground.

"Skid, their pardner," he began, "is bringing Gale out in the coach. Dave and Jim think Skid's a passenger, and that Gale is coming out to visit yuh. That's what Skid is making her tell them. But Skid's holding a gun on Gale, and if anything goes wrong, he's going to kill her."

"It's yore job to keep yore friends quiet," said the fat man blandly to Walt. "That is, if yuh want to keep the girl alive."

Walt Payne's hard, brittle stare was on Tommy.

"And to think Gale has been working two years so yuh could get well to do—this!" he raged.

Tommy flinched from the cold accusation in Walt's voice. The fat man laughed, started to say something. Instead he grew taut, listening. The stage was coming.

"Me an' Pinkie will go inside," the fat man spoke quickly. "We'll have our hands filled, ready to shoot. It'll be up to you to disarm yore friends. If yuh don't, yuh know what will happen."

The two owlhooters went inside, unsheathing their weapons. Walt Payne went toward the corral to get the relief team. Tommy looked after him, his lips twitching. Then he followed.

Walt went into the corral, slipped on bridles. He removed the tie-ropes, tossed them to the ground beside the gate. Then he lined up the reins and drove the two-span team out of the corral.

Tommy approached him. "Walt, I —I—" he said hesitantly.

"Get out of my sight," Walt growled, "before I break yore neck!"

"But, Walt, yuh don't understand." Tommy walked nearer, dropped his voice. "That fat man is Froggy Hull. The others are Skid Hardwick and Pinkie Moore. They're wanted down in Texas. I recognized them, tried to—"

From the corner of the building came the crunch of sole leather on gravel. Pinkie stalked up, gun carelessly pointed.

"Don't let that Texas reward worry yuh," he grumbled. "Kid, yuh get inside where we can keep an eye on yuh. You, hombre, get that team out front pronto. Don't try stalling for a break. We've got the winning hand. Skid's holding it, with his six-gun shoved against yore gal's backbone."

Pinkie followed Tommy around the corner and into the station. Walt closed and latched the corral gate, so that his private riding bronc wouldn't get out. Suddenly then, the four tie-ropes on the ground near the gate caught Walt's eye. His gaze went from the ropes to the outlaw's three broncs, tied nearby to the fence. Walt stared a moment, then chuckled softly and picked up three of the ropes.

TEN minutes later, the stage freighter rolled up out front, Dave yelling a greeting. Walt called a reply, and drove the relief team around the corner. Up beside Dave, the mine guard looked around cautiously, fondling his Winchester.

"Jim's got the jitters," said big, affable Dave, clambering down to unhitch the team. "Told me something about three owlhooters. What's it all about?"

Walt Payne kept his eyes from the dusk-cloaked interior of the passenger compartment.

"Did Gale come out with yuh?" he asked.

"Yeah. Her and a passenger are inside. Gale said she was . . . Say, wonder why she ain't getting out. I'll go see."

"No!" Walt's terse voice stopped the big driver. "They've got us cold-decked," he whispered. "That feller in the stage has a gun in Gale's back, ready to blast her in half if we try anything. Dave, and you too, Jim. Throw yore guns down."

They were taut under the strain. No one spoke; no one moved. Big Dave's hands clenched. He had never yet sidestepped a fight. He thought of battling this out. Then he remembered the heavy six-gun that was thrust against Gale Berkley's slender back, and his hands unclenched. He looked up at the mine guard.

"Throw down yore guns, Jim," he said quietly, unbuckling his Colt and tossing it aside. Slowly, the mine guard threw down his weapons.

Froggy Hull and Pinkie Moore came out of the station then, and Pinkie secured the discarded firearms. Froggy kept his gun out, ready to offset any surprise maneuver. At the fat man's barked order, Gale preceded Skid out of the passenger compartment. The outlaw holstered his gun as he stepped to the ground.

"I—I'm sorry, Walt." Gale's voice was shaky, and her face was ashen. "He—he came to the office and told me to do as he said, or I'd never again see Tommy alive."

"Shore," said Walt, reassuringly. "There wasn't anything else yuh could do. Don't let it worry yuh none."

Tommy came outside the station door, and Gale went to him. Walt wondered what Gale would say when she learned that it was her brother who had thought up this scheme to get the gold.

Skid clambered up on the stage then and threw down the strong-box. Grinning triumphantly, Pinkie shot off the lock and removed the gold. It was in six strong sacks, about twenty pounds to each sack. Pinkie cut the tie-string

on one sack, drew out a handful of the contents. Three pairs of eyes looked greedily as they stared at the gold. Pinkie put it back and retied the sack.

"Get the hosses," Froggy ordered. "We got to be movin'."

Skid went and got them. One mount stumbled as it came around the building corner. Skid mumbled an impatient oath, anxious to get his share of the loot and flee. He ground-hitched the horses off to one side, back out of the pathway of light cast by the lamp shining through the open station door.

The owlhooters picked up the sacks, two for each man—ten thousand dollars apiece. They swung up into saddles, and Froggy Hull grinned.

"See?" he said to Walt Payne. "Not a shot fired. Just like the kid figgered."

The grim trio gathered up bridle reins, started to ride away. Suddenly, startlingly, Walt dropped the reins of the relief team, and put his hand up to his hat. With an abrupt loud yell, he leaped at the three horses' heads, waving his hat, throwing his arms, and yelling and jumping and shouting.

STARTLED, the horses reared back in alarm. Cursing, and while reaching for guns, Froggy and his pards tried to control their mounts. But Walt kept up his wild outburst, and the horses went berserk with fright. Snorting, quivering, the animals tried to flee. Each made one wild, lunging jump. Then they tripped suddenly, and plunged headlong to the ground.

"Take 'em, Dave!" Walt yelled, and dived into the jumble of hooves and floundering bodies. His hard fists lashed out unerringly. Skid went down, knocked cold. Dave and the mine guard rushed Pinkie. After bowling him over, they quickly disarmed him. Tommy leaped for unconscious Skid and secured his weapon. Dave left the mine guard to handle Pinkie, and went to help Walt.

But Walt didn't need any help. His fists flashed like steam-driven pistons—a right, a left, another right. Fat Froggy Hull triggered one harmless shot into the ground. Then he gasped and dropped his weapon, as pile-driver blows ripped into his flabby-fat body. Walt whipped a smashing uppercut against Froggy's fat chin, and the outlaw chief groaned and sagged limply to the ground.

When they had the situation well in hand, Tommy went to Walt. He met Walt's gaze steadily now.

"I knew yuh'd find a way to take care of them," Tommy said, with a grin. "I recognized them today when I met 'em on the trail. When I was in Texas, I saw their pictures on reward notices. Thoughtlessly, I called Froggy by name, and to keep me from

(Concluded on page 113)

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LUCKY STAR

By TOM CURRY

Author of "Frontier Guns," "Dodge City Guns," etc.

Tate turned a furious face toward the door and put a slug within an inch of Husky

When Husky Lewis Loses His Shining Symbol of Authority, He Catapults Into Rapid-Fire Action—and Proves His Mettle!

HUSKY HAL LEWIS, crouched down behind a high clump of mesquite, tensed with expectancy of battle. Cramped from long hours of vigil, he forgot his stiff muscles as he strained his eyes into the black night, trying to identify the dark, vague figures driving the Bar J steers.

He hoped he would at last solve the mystery of the Bar J rustling which had gone on until it had driven Old Man Ban Jackson to fury, a fury which Ban took out on Marshal Lewis, whom the rancher had helped to office.

Beyond, to the west, showed heavy timber marking the precipitous cliffs at the end of that higher plateau. Those cliffs ran mile on mile, cutting off this section from lower western plains. They were too steep to put cattle or ponies down. If Husky could solve that mystery, Ban would have to admit he wasn't so dumb. Most important of all, Jackson's pretty daughter, Louise, would agree.

Lewis' ears pricked up.

He could hear the snorts of the driven cows, the tread of hoofs, as the

bunch pushed southward. The wind blew away from him, toward the cliffs. They were now but a hundred yards from Lewis' hiding place. He could hear low commands of drivers urging on their smart cowponies. Success was just within Hal's grasp. He was not daunted by the number of the thieves, he thought only of his duty.

"Dawggone!" he muttered angrily, coming up on his long legs, gun clearing leather. On the wind from the northeast came the sounds of swift riders galloping in. The rustlers took instant alarm, stringing out in a line, taking cover, pushing their ponies behind bush clumps.

Husky was irritated at being disturbed at such a vital point. The men coming in whooped, fired their pistols. Bullets whirled through the night, over the marshal's head. He started toward the rustlers, gun up.

"Throw down yore irons, rustlers!" a man yelled.

It was a fool thing to do, rush that line of ambushed thieves, who would surely kill to cover themselves. A half dozen cowpunchers swept in, shooting wildly.

LEWIS darted from patch to patch of bush, hoping against hope to get in there, grab one of those thieves. A bullet from behind ripped within an inch of his head, sang into the timber. The rustlers turned loose a murderous, concerted fire on the cowboys. A shriek of agony rang out. Husky turning, saw a shadowy form plunge from a pony behind him. Another puncher began to cry like a baby, a bullet in him.

The charge slowed, broke. Husky raised his six-gun, took aim at a pony he could see to the west, behind a mesquite clump. His hammer fell, and his big gun boomed. The animal leaped, crashed heavily, and a rustler was pinned with leg under the fallen beast. Lewis hurried toward him, oblivious to bullets turned upon him. The capture of one rustler might mean breaking the whole gang.

He could see the black figure, with a dark poncho on. From over a bandanna mask two eyes gleamed balefully at him. He bounded at the rustler, determined to get him. Then something hit him like a blow from a giant sledge. He stumbled, went down, half-buried in bush; blackness was on him.

The sun was up when Marshal Lewis came to, dazed, sore. His head burned angrily; he touched it gingerly, felt clotted blood tangling his tow hair. He shifted his big body, throat dry for water.

"So yuh've come back to life," a voice growled.

He looked around. Several Bar J waddies squatted in a group back of Husky. They had his six-gun, were watching him with narrowed eyes. Stretched out close at hand was the dead form of Jake Withers, the Bar J foreman.

"A rope's what he needs," a cowboy growled.

"What yuh mean?" demanded Husky, sitting up.

"What I said," the injured waddy snarled. "Yuh drilled pore Jake, yuh fool. I think yuh're workin' with them thieves."

Lewis gasped. Red anger surged through him, and he forgot his injury as his fists clenched.

"Why, damn yuh. If it hadn't bin fer you rushin' in I'd have got them. Yuh ruint my game."

"Sure, we spoilt yore game," sneered the cowboy.

"If yuh was any good as a sheriff, yuh'd have 'em by this time," another said.

The sun glinted on the five-pointed silvery star pinned to Husky's vest. The pin clasp was broken and had an annoying habit of coming undone. The star hung by a thread now, and mechanically he adjusted it.

"Gimme my gun," he ordered.

But they refused. He rose up, started at them.

"Wait—here comes Miss Louise," somebody said.

HUSKY'S heart jumped as he turned his eyes east. A girl rode swiftly up. It was Louise Jackson, beautiful, youthfully fresh, with raven-black hair under her neat Stetson, small

and dainty in her clean riding clothes. She pulled up close to them, looking at the dark faces of her father's men.

"What's wrong?" she demanded.

"Jake's dead as stone," explained a cowboy. "Lewis shot him."

"That's crazy," cried Husky. "I fired toward the rustlers. If yuh hadn't horned in, creased me, I'd have got 'em."

"It's nonsense to think Marshal Lewis has any connection with them," Louise said coldly. "Give him back his gun and get going, pronto."

Shamefaced, they passed Lewis his six-shooter, picked up Jake Withers, tied him to a saddle. Lewis walked alongside the girl's stirrup to the place where his pony was hidden.

"Thanks, ma'am."

She stared at him. "I'm sorry. Sorry you're hurt, Hal. And sorrier yet you didn't—" She broke off. Her eyes could not meet his. Husky knew what she was thinking and was ashamed. She went on, "Here comes Father. You'd better get on back to town." Her voice had a weary note in it, as she swung and galloped away.

Husky shrugged, mounted, rode southeast toward town.

Seated in his office that afternoon, Lewis was startled by a commotion down the road. It sounded like a riot —howls of rage, shrieks, shots, echoes of explosions. Head still aching, he swore as he swung his long legs off the battered desk and started on a run for the Blue Ribbon saloon. The sun gleamed on his star which had brought him everything but good luck.

Timid citizens had run from the Blue Ribbon, stood on the porch. Complaints rose as Husky appeared.

"Say, Lewis, yuh ought to stop this kinda thing. 'Tain't safe fer a man to hev a quiet drink."

Louise Jackson was crossing the road at the side of a stocky, frowning rancher. Old Ban Jackson was always frowning now, complaining to Husky that he ought to stop that rustling, catch the men who were driving off great bunches of steers from his vast range.

The riot inside the Blue Ribbon had assumed epic proportions. Husky took the steps at a bound, shoved through the door. The shooting was spaced, a shot every few seconds. Bull Tate, huge, with beetling black brows, bulldog chin and fierce whisky eyes, growled deep-throated curses which he punctuated with his .45. As though singing a duet with him, Snaky Griggs, a ratlike little man was swearing in a high-pitched falsetto, dodging bullets.

"Drop that gun, Tate!" roared Husky.

Tate turned a furious face toward the door and put a slug within an inch of Husky.

An exclamation close behind told Lewis that Ban Jackson had entered the saloon after him, was in the line of fire. Maybe Louise was right outside there, in danger. Cold sweat broke out on his skin. Bull was shooting wild, might hit someone. Tate's gun was coming back to level. Lewis made a lightning draw, his hammer clicked down. Tate suddenly dropped his pistol on the floor. He stared surprised, at his bleeding hand.

Husky took a step toward the shaken bully. Griggs made a dive for the loose iron. The marshal bounded in, caught Snaky in the ribs, knocking him sprawling.

"I'll check yore gun with the bartender, Bull. Yuh can have it when yuh're sober," Husky said mildly, picking up the gun.

INSTEAD of thanking him for saving him from a murder charge, Bull Tate cursed him. Griggs crouched nearby, green eyes glowing with hatred.

"They was both raisin' hell," the barkeeper told Husky. "Griggs run a pair of aces into a game, takin' 'em from his sleeve. Bull caught him. Lock 'em both up, Marshal."

Husky shook his head. He couldn't see locking the pair up for what turned out to be horseplay. "Git, both of yuh," he ordered.

Jackson touched his shoulder. "Want to talk to yuh, Lewis," he said coldly.

"Let's go back to the office," said Husky meekly.

Outside, Louise glanced at him.

"You're losing your badge," she told him.

Husky looked down at his vest. That darn star was always coming loose when he moved fast. He felt now like a boy about to be interviewed by a stern school principal. A trio of big men in fancy clothes dismounted at the saloon rails, ducked under them.

"Howdy, Thomas," sang out Ban. "How 'bout a game? I kin play in a few minutes."

"Okay," drawled Ken Thomas. He was a very handsome, smooth man of thirty, as large as Husky but much better turned out. His huge, cream-colored Stetson had cost sixty dollors, his fine halfboots were of softest leather, with golden spurs a blatant flourish of wealth. He was a big cattle dealer from the eastern section of the county. His companions, Davis and O'Shea, worked for him.

Thomas stopped close to Louise, who smiled up at him, so that Lewis' easy-going nature was pierced by a jealous barb. He had liked Thomas well enough, as he liked everybody, from sheer good humor. But Thomas was a serious rival.

Snaky Griggs suddenly materialized from between the saloon and the next building, and staggered to Thomas.

"Say, listen, tell Tate he's got to let me alone, damn his dirty—"

Ken Thomas drew back his fist, sent a short jab to the reeling man's chin. Husky heard knuckles crack on bone. Griggs' feet left the walk, he crashed heavily.

"Mind yore talk around a lady," said Thomas coldly.

Griggs put a hand back to push himself up. Thomas construed this as an attempt to draw. It was only Lewis' quick fist, darting out, that saved Griggs. The marshal's rising hand knocked up Thomas' gun, the slug burying itself in the awning above.

Thomas was furious but Lewis had his wrist now in an iron grip.

"Let go, fool," snarled the cattle dealer, and slapped Husky sharply in the mouth with his left hand.

The blow, given in front of watching men and Louise, stung Husky to the quick. He jerked heavily on Thomas, pulling him toward him. Letting go of the man's wrist, he sent a fist crashing to his face, and the handsome man suddenly sat down, as Griggs had.

Davis and O'Shea were starting for their guns. Ban Jackson took a hand.

"Easy, gents! Cut it out. Griggs ain't got a gun on him. Lewis, yuh hadn't ought to 've done that." He stepped in front of Hal.

"Hold it," said Thomas, quickly rising, brushing dust off his fancy pants. He slid his .45 back into the pleated holster. He glared at Lewis; then his face relaxed into an easy smile.

Jackson seized Husky's arm, propelled him toward the office.

"WHAT the hell's wrong with yuh?" Jackson began querulously. "When I backed yuh fer town marshal, I figgered on yuh to bust up that rustlin'. Last night I lost a bunch more off'n my west range. The critters drift that way now with the wind, but the cliffs should stop 'em. My foreman Withers died last night. The boys claim it was from yore bullets."

"If they hadn't horned in, I might've caught one of them thieves," said Husky. "Must be a hidden canyon over that way—"

"Hidden canyon, hell! Them cliffs are unscalable, fer miles. I used to like yuh well, Lewis, but yuh ain't got enough gumption to bust up that gang. Yuh ain't fitten to wear that star. Take it or leave it." Old Man Jackson stuck out a belligerent chin which, had Ben been thirty years younger and no relative of Louise, Husky would surely have hit. As it was, he just shook his head.

"I'll ride over again, see what I can find."

"Better find s o m e t h i n' pronto," growled Old Ban.

Lewis closed up the office, fetched his horse. He was mounting when Louise hurried up.

"Hal," she called.

He wished he could talk as airily as Thomas, but words failed him when he looked into her eyes. "I—I'm ridin'," he said.

"You've been to the cliffs twice. Hal, you're so easy-going."

He shook a miserable head, reached for her hand. She let him hold it.

"I'm really sorry for you, Hal. I—I like you, but Dad's angry, doesn't want me to see you any more."

"I'll be ridin'." He gulped. "I s'pose yore paw cheers when yuh ride out with that dude Thomas!"

"Mister Thomas is mighty nice. You shouldn't have hit him that way. He backed you for marshal, has always been friendly to you."

"No friend would've pinned this dawggone star on me. When I quit my ranch, I never figgered to step into a mess like this."

She shrugged, turned. He swung into his saddle, trotted northwest, toward the cliffs.

After a smart ride he came to the small shack, closed now, marking his own small outfit. His few steers ranged the prairie, grazing for themselves. Now and then Lewis would visit his former home, but there wasn't much to do.

He put his pony in the barn and went into the silent, one-room shack. The bunk beckoned to him.

Lewis woke with a start. It was dark, but he felt a lot better. He swung his boots to the plank floor, was reaching for a match to light a candle. He listened. Alert he went to the door, peeked out. A couple of dark-robed horsemen sat their mounts in the clear space before the hut.

Husky started out. They fired at him, each one two shots that whizzed over him, buried in the rough logs. He raised his .45 to answer but they galloped off, zigzagging. Lewis dashed to the barn and got his pony. It was evident they had known he was inside.

Lines of puzzlement wrinkled his broad face as he started after them. Why hadn't they crept in, killed him as he slept? But maybe they hadn't known he was asleep. Anyway, he would try to catch them. Plainly they were rustlers.

He slowed down. Maybe they were leading him into ambush. There were bunches of bush and cacti; to his right, wooded cliffs. He cursed as his straining eyes saw the red glow among the trees. Odor of burnt hair and hide reached him. He swung toward the fire. The horsemen had swept past the fire, disappeared. Husky came up cautiously, dismounted in the shadows, staring through the thick woods. Two more shots sounded, and Lewis tensed, gun up, staring that way.

A TRUSSED steer lay in the firelight circle. Husky crept closer, much interested in the branding irons lying on a flat rock. He took a chance, reached for one, expecting to be fired on, but no slugs came his way. He squatted, looking over the iron. It was of a type which made a set brand, had two parallel upright lines, and, at their base, in the following space, a rather long bar.

He didn't savvy the meaning of the set till he looked at the steer's brand. Two fresh lines burned into the hide over a former crossbar made it H. The base bar lengthened the straight line which ran perpendicular to the J upright, making a fair L.

"Well, dang my hide," gasped Husky. This iron obviously changed a Bar J into H L, his own mark. He stood over the steer, formerly a Bar J animal, now branded his.

So amazed was he that he simply stood, a full target in the firelight. Red rage simmered in him, as he whanged the crooked iron on the rock in fury. Clicking guns sent him after his pistol; a slug sang past his ear.

"Reach, rustler," bawled a man.

Husky would have shot it out, died rather than quit, but he recognized that voice. It was Old Man Jackson who stepped toward him from the plain. With him were two of his punchers and the broad figure of Ken Thomas.

"Wouldn't have b'lieved it, if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes," cried Jackson. "Take away his gun, boys." His face was serious, for this was a hanging offense, to be caught with an illegal iron and branding-fire. He picked up the iron Husky had bent over the rock, stared at it. "Set brand, to change my brand to your'n!"

"It ain't true," cried Husky. "Ban, I was out here lookin' fer them rustlers. I seen this fire, come up—"

"Hush," ordered Jackson tensely.

"Yuh're through, Lewis. Guess the boys was right when they said yuh shot Withers. It's plain as day now. Yuh come out, purtendin' to be huntin' the thieves, when yuh been runnin' the bus'ness all along, changin' brands on my cows to your'n. Yore cows run the open range with mine. When my boys seen one with yore brand, they let her go. Yuh been drivin' 'em off in bunches, selling 'em."

"Never woulda thought it, Ban," Thomas said gravely. "This hombre sure fooled me. Acts dumb but—well, it's a shame."

"Keep yore m o u t h o u t a this," growled Husky.

Thomas hit him, then, a blow flush on the nose that brought water to Lewis' eyes.

"That's for the one yuh give me," he said.

Husky, ignoring the guns, whirled at him, clinched. Jackson and his men couldn't shoot for fear of hitting Thomas. Lewis managed to knock Thomas down, hit him savagely several times before he was pulled off, battered to the ground with pistol butts, sat on.

"Tie him up," ordered Jackson.

The furious Thomas was on his feet. "String him up!" he snarled.

A lariat was brought. The loop was placed over Husky's head.

"Yuh're makin' a bad mistake," Husky said, but did not cringe.

"That tall pine's got a good limb, right over there," Jackson said, ignoring Husky.

The rope was tossed up over the limb, brought down on the other side.

"Anything yuh want to say?" growled Jackson.

Lewis shrugged. There sounded a girl's voice from where the ponies waited.

"Hell, it's Louise," Jackson said. "Hold it, boys, we can't let her see this." He swung, called, "Wait there, honey. We'll be with yuh in a jiffy."

BUT the girl kept coming through the rough. "What's wrong?" she cried.

"Caught him at it," her father told her. "Look at that set iron. Changed my brand to his'n. He's our rustler."

"I don't believe it!" cried Louise. She swung, backed over beside Husky. She drew her Colt .45, menaced her father, Thomas and the punchers. "I'll shoot the first man who touches him."

Jackson took a step toward her. "Put down that gun and cut out this foolishment," he ordered harshly.

Lewis stepped over and snatched the pistol from Thomas' holster. He did not think Louise would shoot her father, but he wished to save her from her predicament. With Husky armed, Jackson stopped. The four men stood silent, hands up, as Lewis and the girl backed from the light, toward the horses beyond.

They reached the saddled ponies. She swung into her saddle, and Husky mounted a swift Bar J pony. After a two-mile gallop through the star-flecked night, Lewis spoke.

"Where we goin'?"

"Why, away from there, as far as possible."

He pulled his pony to a halt, and impatiently she turned with him. "Better not waste any time, Hal."

"How'd yuh happen to ride out this way?"

"I was worried about you, alone near the cliffs. Then I saw Ken Thomas and Father ride out, and decided to trail along to see if I could help. I—it's hard to believe, Hal, that you—you were with those rustlers."

"But, Louise, yuh sure don't think so. Why, yuh saved me from lynchin'."

"What of it? I couldn't see you die that way. I'm going to ride to the east passes with you, then I'll leave you and you can escape." She was cool, had control of herself.

"I ain't runnin' away, because I ain't guilty. I was led into a trap. Only one thing for me to do, that's catch the real rustlers and make 'em talk."

She sat her saddle, staring at him as he swung about. Then she turned and trotted to catch up with him. "I'm going with you, Hal!"

Lewis' doubling back had been the best thing to elude pursuit. Jackson and his men rode swiftly to the Bar J, picked up the string of riders, pushed due east, hoping to catch them.

Meanwhile the two had cut north, then come down along the dark cliffs to Husky's ranch. Hiding their ponies in the barn, daylight found them eating a cold snack from cached food.

"Where's your star?" asked Louise.

The marshal glanced down at the vacant place on his vest.

"Dawggone if it ain't gone altogether. I'm glad to be rid of it. It was sure not what yuh'd call a lucky star!"

DAY showed the plains vacant save for roaming bunches of cows.

"I'm ridin' out, along the cliffs," Lewis said.

Louise did not try to stop him. He saddled up, mounted, trotted south along the jagged, wooded rockland edging the cliffs. He rode on, the sun mounting high. No Bar J riders showed.

His cartridge belt was filled with .45 cartridges which fitted Thomas' pistol. He knew he hadn't much time, hadn't much to hope for. He walked his pony slowly on, through the morning, pausing now and then to inspect what seemed a trail to the west precipices, but balked each time as it proved only a false lead. He had made this survey before, never getting anywhere. He shrugged as his gaze fixed on a wall of solid brush between two high rocks.

Something caught his eye, held it. He grunted, started to ride on. No cow could walk through the mass. Then he dismounted, and walked stiff-leggedly up to the brush, began poking around. After a short investigation he seized the right hand side of the mess of brush, gave a hard tug. The whole thing shifted, showed an opening between the rocks. The brush wall was a mat, a mask hiding a trail through the woods to the cliffs.

Husky Lewis lay inside that bush entrance, completely hidden, waiting patiently. It was not yet dark. He had concealed his pony well, some distance off, and doubled back through the woods. At last horsemen were approaching.

Later the brush mat crackled as two men dismounted to shift it.

They were now close to Lewis, so he could hear them talking together. One was Bull Tate, his right hand bandaged where Husky had scratched him. The second was Snaky Griggs.

"What the hell's the idea, makin' us work in the daytime?" complained Griggs' high voice. "If some of them Bar J waddies see us, we're cooked."

"Aw, they've rode off after that Lewis fool," growled Tate. "We got a big order to fill quick, and this is our chanct. What's wrong? Yuh yeller?"

"Naw, I ain't yeller. Jist what yuh mean by that?" snarled Griggs.

"What I said," went on Tate deliberately. "The boss don't approve of the way you been shootin' off yore mush. That's why, Snaky, he give me the pleasure of ridin' out with yuh. I ain't fergot yore crooked cards, yuh buzzard—reach, damn yuh!"

Lewis peeked around his rock. Bull Tate, broad back to Husky, had his gun pointed at Griggs' heart. The ratlike man stared, trembling at the black muzzle of death.

"Don't—don't shoot, please, Bull. I ain't—"

Tate's face was lit with savage pleasure. "This is from the boss as well as from me."

As his thumb started to lift off the hammer, to send a slug through Griggs' heart, Lewis fired. Bull Tate doubled back with a grunt of anguish, pistol falling from limp hand. Griggs stared, unbelieving for an instant. His eyes traveled on, saw the puff of smoke, then the marshal's head over the rock.

"Just keep still, Griggs," ordered Lewis.

"He—he was goin' to murder me," gasped Snaky, sickly under his tan.

"Sure he was. I saved yuh."

"Here—here they all come," gasped Griggs.

OUT on the plain a dust cloud rose. Men were driving over a big herd of Bar J steers, toward the gate. Lewis quickly tied and gagged Griggs, left him out of sight in the bushes. He dragged Bull Tate's body into a thicket. The shot, if it was heard, the rustlers would attribute to Tate, finishing off little Griggs. Husky waited grimly in his hiding place.

Presently steers began coming

through the open gate, flank riders heading back those which tried to diverge along the woods. After a couple of hundred marketable beeves had passed in, the rustlers closed the gate, following them west. Lewis glimpsed several of the men. They were tough looking hombres, and though masked, he recognized two or three figures as loafers around the town, supposed cowhands out of work.

"Where's Bull?" he heard one say.

"Went up ahead, I guess."

Husky stole through the woods on their trail. The cliffs at a point here had eroded, cracked down into a natural dip which ended at a steep, unscalable slide. Lewis hid himself off to the south, where he could see along the jagged cliffside. The rustlers set about their work at once, working with precision from long practice.

A steer would be thrown, hogtied, attached to a long, strong rope, shoved over the brink, and slid down, descent checked from too sudden movements by men on the rope. Men were waiting below to release the noose, drag the steer out where it could be untied and driven to the lower plains. In the meantime, another cow was tied, ready to descend the slide.

The sun was reddening. Suddenly the marshal gasped. A figure broke out from the trail that led in from the Bar J range. A stooping rustler looked up, caught a glimpse of Louise Jackson, staring in amazement at the thieves through the trees. The rustler whooped, drew his gun. Husky fired an instant ahead of him, sent him rolling head over heels, screaming with pain. An instant later the whole gang dived for their guns.

"Git her—catch her," the leader of the band bawled.

Louise turned to run, stumbled on a rock. They were shooting toward her. Husky rose, firing to hold them back, rattle them, give her a chance. She saw him, turned aside to run to his side. A bullet knocked off his Stetson as the rustlers, too, saw him, and turned a hail of bullets his way. Another slug creased across his left shoulder, bringing the warm blood. Others buried in trees and earth nearby.

"Run back, other way!" Husky called to the girl, who was heading into the line of fire. She did not hear him above the roar, was excited, called out his name. Then she fell, face down, among the leaves.

The frantic officer, believing she was dead, ran westward, to draw the bullets away from her. He was clipped in the thigh, and just managed to hop to the shelter of a high rock. Panting for breath, he picked off two of his enemies.

The others took cover. Some began to circle, to catch him from the other side. It looked bad.

Then he was dimly aware of yells, shots coming from the in-trail. Old Man Ban Jackson, accompanied by a bunch of his boys, Ken Thomas among them, rushed up, attracted by the shooting. The rustlers beat a swift retreat, blocked at the cliff face but scattering to the sides. A couple tried to take the slide. One lost footing halfway down and went plunging to the bottom. The men down below realized what was going on. They scattered, running for their mounts.

WITHIN five minutes the firing had died to a few scattered shots. The rustlers had either taken lead, surrendered, or made a run into the bush. Cowboys were following these latter up.

Old Man Jackson stood with Ken Thomas. Marshal Lewis pushed himself up, tried to stand, but had to keep all his weight on his left leg, propping himself up with a hand on his rock. He called to Jackson. Thomas swung, stared at him, hand dropping to his pistol.

"There's that L e w i s hombre!" Thomas shouted.

Lewis had no intention of taking a bullet from the cattle dealer. His steady gun covered Thomas.

"Git Louise, Ban," he called. "She's down there, bad hurt."

Old Man Jackson cursed, went in the direction Husky indicated, found the young woman's body. He picked her up, tears in his eyes. Husky, staring eagerly that way, saw blood on her face, dripping from her dark hair.

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"She ain't daid, on'y creased! Thomas—fetch my canteen," Jackson yelled.

Thomas turned, went hurrying back along the path. Husky hopped to Jackson, who was now oblivious to all save his daughter.

"Will—will she live?" gasped Lewis.

Jackson scowled up at him. "I think so. Bullet cut her scalp right bad. No thanks to yore mob of killers—"

A slug whirled within an inch of Husky's ear. The marshal swung, his gun blazing. He saw the twisted face of his rival, Ken Thomas, who had tried to sneak back and shoot him in the spine. Thomas dropped the gun he held, clutched his side, fell in the trail, a bullet through his ribs.

"Now," said Old Man Jackson, ramming a six-shooter muzzle into Husky's side, "drop that gun. Yuh done enough damage."

Lewis was a prisoner. He sank down, staring at Louise's pale face. The Bar J boys had rounded up several prisoners.

Two waddies down aways near the plain, pushing through the bush, had stumbled on Bull Tate's corpse and little Griggs, tied up as Husky left him.

Water from canteens, brought up, revived Louise. She lay with her injured head in her father's lap, but her eyes were on the battered marshal. Thomas had been helped up to them; he was suffering from the bullet Husky had put into him, furious at Lewis.

"Yore doublin' back didn't fool me long, Lewis," growled Jackson. "We rode east fer a spell, but then swung back. Met Thomas. Got yuh cold, Husky."

"But I tell yuh I was hid up here, watchin' them rustlers," the marshal said. "I started the shootin' when they fired on Louise. The thieves been drivin' yore cows up here, lowerin' 'em to their pals below, who drive 'em off to a safe place, rebrand 'em, sell 'em at their leisure."

"Yuh oughta know all about it," growled Thomas, "seein' as yuh're their leader."

Little Griggs was glaring balefully at Thomas.

"Yuh dirty liar," he burst out furiously. "Yuh tried to do me in, twict. Lewis saved me both times and I'm

(Concluded on page 112)

HOWDY, gals and galluses! They got a lot of tests nowadays to caculate how smart a person is. Things used to be simpler when a man wanted to be a Ranger. If he could shoot straight and live straight, it didn't matter much if he could read or write.

The questions and answers method of gauging a man's intelligence furnishes misleadin' results right often and don't prove how useful a man is. But it's a good fun game and sometimes lays on two or three layers to his fund o' general information.

Let us test ourselves for our western abc's on this here list of 20 questions, the answers to which you'll find kite-tailed onto the end o' this here department. Don't look yet. C'mon, folks, let's get FRONTIER POSTED!

1. Does ALAMO mean a:
   a fort
   b kind of tree
   c town plaza
2. Is ARRASTRE a:
   a Mex cussword
   b semi-precious stone
   c ore-grinder
3. Is LARCH a:
   a tree
   b bird
   c watercourse
4. Is OXBOW a:
   a weapon
   b weather sign
   c river bend
5. Was COCHISE a:
   a pioneer scout
   b Indian chief
   c hardpan
6. Is SACATON a:
   a part of a saddle
   b venomous insect
   c range grass
7. Is CHOLLA a:
   a food
   b cave
   c cactus
8. Is CALICHE a:
   a mineral deposit
   b small jail
   c songbird
9. Is YANKEE BREECHING:
   a hair chaps
   b a type of harness
   c high boots
10. Is SCREWBEAN a:
    a loco weed
    b kind of mesquite
    c horse thief
11. A MINER'S INCH is:
    a water measurement
    b distance
    c a joke
12. A HONDO is a:
    a silver ornament
    b loop
    c dry creek
13. A BUSCADERO is a:
    a young cowboy
    b anteater
    c two-gun belt
14. A TAPADERO is a:
    a small spring
    b saddle cloak
    c stirrup cover
15. SAM HOUSTON fought:
    a Pancho Villa
    b Juarez
    c Santa Anna
16. The RIO GRANDE rises in:
    a Texas
    b Oklahoma
    c Colorado
17. Which predominate in U. S.:
    a cattle
    b sheep
    c hogs
18. A JAVELINA is a:
    a wild hog
    b knife
    c playing card
19. A BEAVER eats:
    a fish
    b trees
    c aquatic plants
20. A BANDALERO is a:
    a saddle cinch
    b hat
    c bullfighter

You'll come on all these words and expressions in reading the stories in this and other issues o' TEXAS RANGERS Magazine, gals and galluses. They're familiar to mighty nearly everybody in Texas, specially along the border. My advice is that you get a pencil and check off what you figure are the right answers. Go through all twenty questions like that, then look for the correct answers starting on next page. But don't look first.

Are You Frontier Posted?

If you answered all twenty correct, you're genuinely FRONTIER POSTED and a sure-enough Ranger. If you get fifteen, you're a mighty savvy hombre. If you get ten, you're average. Below that means you better study up some more.

The questions, they'll come harder in the next Frontier Post get-together. Some will be geography questions, which stump real experts. Seems like most folks are lame on geography, even of their own country.

Back in the days when folks didn't travel nearly so much, they knew their geography better. A frontiersman had to.

Oldtime scouts and trappers could draw you a right accurate map o' western United States, putting in the mountain ranges and the principal rivers. They was by no means an educated lot, but savvy of distance, direction and location was plenty important to them.

They couldn't hop on a train, a bus or drive an automobile along a highway to get places they wanted to. They had to remember places and how to get there and what it was like at different seasons and was there hoss feed along the route.

No Roads Them Days

Every time I go skimmin' over this wide western land I ponder on how the early

wagon folks ever did turn a wheel. I've heard heaps o' other travellers express the same wonder.

Even along the well-established emigrant routes there was no such thing as a road, a real road. Just dim wheeltracks marked the routes and there were miles where winter storms plum erased thus.

Prob'ly the old cattle herd routes, such as the Chisholm Trail, were better-marked.

Teaming Tricks

Sure, there were teaming tricks, same as in all trades. In steep going, the wagons would go over a summit one at a time, with everybody unhooking to help his neighbor, hitching on six, eight or more animals, as need called for.

In fording big rivers, such as the Red in north Texas, they'd remove the wheels, fasten the wagon bed on a log raft, and pole 'er across. The animals would have to swim for it. Gettin' 'em into the water called for a flock of persuasive language, I'm told. How pious-minded folks made it is hard to savvy. But I reckon it took praying as much as profanity to keep a wagon train rolling.

The Friendly Stars

Me, I can recollect slow, hard travel over country pretty much unsettled and I figure the thing a man remembers the most are the nights, when the long dark came on, and there you were in the middle of a sea of darkness a hundred miles across, maybe, from the light in one settler's window to the next. The stars were friendly companions on such nights and each sunrise a welcome visitor.

ANSWERS TO QUIZ

WELL, gals and galluses, here's the answers. Now let's see how well you're FRONTIER POSTED:

1. An ALAMO is a cottonwood tree. (Mex word for it.) The town plaza at San Antonio

[*Turn page*]

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was so named on account of it was shaded by a big, old cottonwood. Most of the fighting in that famous battle of the Alamo was along the adobe walls that enclosed the plaza, from which some people figure Alamo means fort.

2. An ARRASTRE is a crude ore-grinder or crushing stone. It was usually operated by a horse or mule hitched to a long pole that went round and round. Arrastres are still used in out-of-the-way mining parts.

3. A LARCH is an evergreen tree, a sort of scrub fir or tamarack. A lark is a bird, yessir, and a loch is Scottish dialect for lake.

4. Sure, an OXBOW is a wooden yoke. But that wasn't part o' the question. Oxbow is also a river bend and the piece of land inside o' such a bend.

5. COCHISE was an Apache chief in Arizona and New Mexico who preyed on Texas cattlemen driving their herds west after the close of the War Between the States.

6. SACATON is a coarse range grass, sometimes called soapweed and beargrass. It grows in Texas and all through the Southwest.

7. CHOLLA is the so-called "jumping" cactus. It comes in about nine varieties, and each one is worse'n the other.

8. CALICHE is a mineral deposit. It's a silicate rock, sort of chalky, and in west Texas forms a hardpan in many places, too tough for a plow.

9. Here's the hard one unless you've handled horses a whole lot. YANKEE BREECHING is the holdback straps on a type of wagon harness.

10. SCREWBEAN mesquite is so-called on account of the pod growing twistwise. The pod on loco weed is a spiral, also. And a horse thief sometimes whirled at the end of a rope. So SCREWBEAN is a kind of mesquite.

11. A MINER'S INCH is a unit of water measurement. It means the level flow of water, such as through a headgate, one inch deep and a foot wide.

12. A HONDO is the loop in a lariat. The word is sometimes confused with "creek" because it's a common name for small, winding streams; that is, Hondo Creek or Rio Hondo. A silver ornament is called a concha.

13. A BUSCADERO is a gunbelt with two holsters attached—being a little handier for two-gun men than wearing crossed belts with one holster on each. An anteater is an armadillo.

14. A TAPADERO is a hard leather stirrup cover that protects a rider's feet in brush country. A saddle cloak is a poncho. A small spring is—well, a small spring.

15. It was the Mexican general Santa Anna that Sam Houston fought at the Alamo.

16. Colorado.

17. Latest Department of Agriculture figures are: 53 million hogs, 56 million sheep, 72 million cattle. But that ain't so many, our Australian friends tell us. Over there they've got 120 million sheep alone. (Providing 120 million sheep can be alone.)

18. A JAVELINA is the border country name for a wild hog, you bet. They're hunted in Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and northern Mexico, where vicious javelinas sometimes hunt the hunters.

19. A BEAVER eats aquatic plants but gnaws down saplings and even big trees to build dams. And the beaver builds dams to make ponds where he can build his mud-daubed lodge with an underwater entrance to make it exclusive. And also safe from marauders.

20. A BANDALERO is a cartridge sling worn across a shoulder. A sombrero is a Mexican hat and a picadero is the hombre who sticks darts in a bullfight. And I reckon that explains everything.

What's your score?

—CAPTAIN STARR.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

FOLKS, that was sure a plumb interesting test of our knowledge that Captain Starr gave us up above. How'd you make out? I'd like to know—and I'd also like your opinion of Captain Starr's palaver—when you send your next letter to The Edi-

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So long! See you next issue.

—THE EDITOR.

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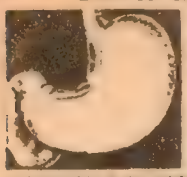

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LUCKY STAR

(Concluded from page 107)

goin' to do somethin' in return. Mister Jackson, Thomas is the top boss of this rustler bunch. I was in it, and so was Bull Tate. O'Shea and Davis run the party down below, as can easy be proved. Thomas backed Lewis fer marshal so's he'd be in town, outa the way here, as it was unhandy havin' him so close on his ranch. Then Thomas got sore at Lewis fer hittin' him, when the marshal saved my life. He told Tate to kill me. Thomas wanted to finish off Lewis, make him suffer; also throw yuh off his track." He added, "And that's Gawd's truth."

Ken Thomas let out a nasty growl and tried to turn on the little informer, but Husky thrust out a quick foot and tripped the cattle dealer. The wounded Thomas was quickly subdued.

"So!" exclaimed Jackson. "So that's some of the business yuh was busy at when you didn't ride with me and the boys off east after Husky. That's why yuh jined up with us later—after yuh found out which way we was headin' a while ago."

Griggs' story was easily substantiated all around. The capture of O'Shea and Davis down below on the lower plains cinched matters when they started to talk. The break-up of the rustling gang, slow in coming, was swift in effect.

Ban Jackson was right handsome about his apology to the marshal.

"I'm plumb sorry, Husky," he said, looking from the lawman to his daughter who was holding Husky's hand as though she was never going to let go. "I was wrong and you was right. But how on earth did yuh stumble onto this place with us chasin' yuh?"

Husky Lewis grinned as he fished in his pocket and produced his badge.

"I lost this in that scuffle with Thomas. From what yuh've just said, I know now it was Thomas who picked it up and carried it away. Anyhow, it was the sun shinin' on this star that caught my eye and led me to find the hidden rustler gate. So I reckon I'll have to call it my lucky star, after all."

"Our lucky star," corrected Louise.

And that was that.

THE TROUBLE SMITH

(Concluded from page 98)

telling who they were and spreading an alarm, they made me ride with them. They saw it was impossible to rush the branch office and take the gold, so they decided to come here after dark and pick yuh off, Walt, then kill Dave and Jim when the stage rolled up. I couldn't let that happen, so I showed them how to take the gold without a shot being fired. Mebbe it wasn't a nice way to treat Gale and the rest of yuh, but it was the best I could think up in a hurry."

After a moment's silence, Walt Payne held out his hand.

"You oughta kick out my teeth, for what I said and thought," he said sheepishly.

"Say," laughed Tommy, taking Walt's hand, "all I did was get them out here. It was up to you to save the gold. Yuh did, just like I knew yuh would." Tommy moved away to help Jim tie up the three outlaws.

Big Dave Davis scratched his head and stared at the outlaws' mounts. They had regained their feet and, reins trailing, stood a few yards away.

"I don't savvy what made them hosses fall," he grumbled. "Riding broncs don't do tricks like those three at once, even in the dark."

Walt Payne laughed. "I figgered our only chance was to catch them fellers off balance," he explained, "since they had all the guns. So I hobbled their broncs with tie-ropes tied just above the knees on their front legs. They were high enough not to be noticed in the dark, and long enough so the broncs could walk. But they were too short for them to run or jump, without tripping and falling. I gave them a scare to make them jump—and—it worked!"

•

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29x5.25-19	2.45	1.15
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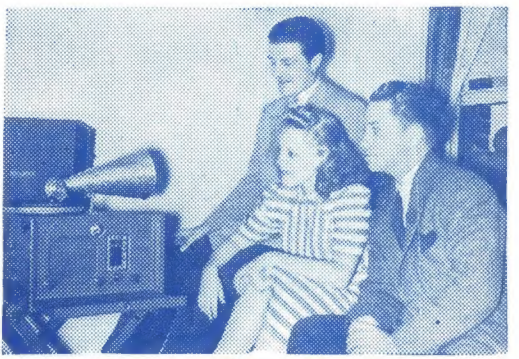

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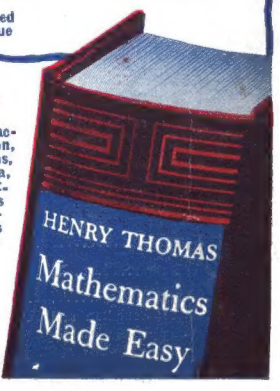
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